AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル
6
【下】
著●川上稔
イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）
電撃文庫

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

6
【下】

—Everyone.
Let us test
The past of this world

The Ending Chronicle

Act.06

CHARACTER

02

01

CTER

04

Wanambi is an information heat entity created from
the collective thoughts of the Messengers of Wanambi.
He is a concept dragon
that exists everywhere and yet nowhere.

Name: Sf

• About 8th-Gear •

8th-Gear was a world of empty space and Wanambi.
The Messengers of Wanambi are thermal life forms,
so they continued to live by emitting heat into
the empty space of their world. For that reason,
they took a form that dœs not allow excess heat to escape
and they build up heat through thought.

Name: Baku

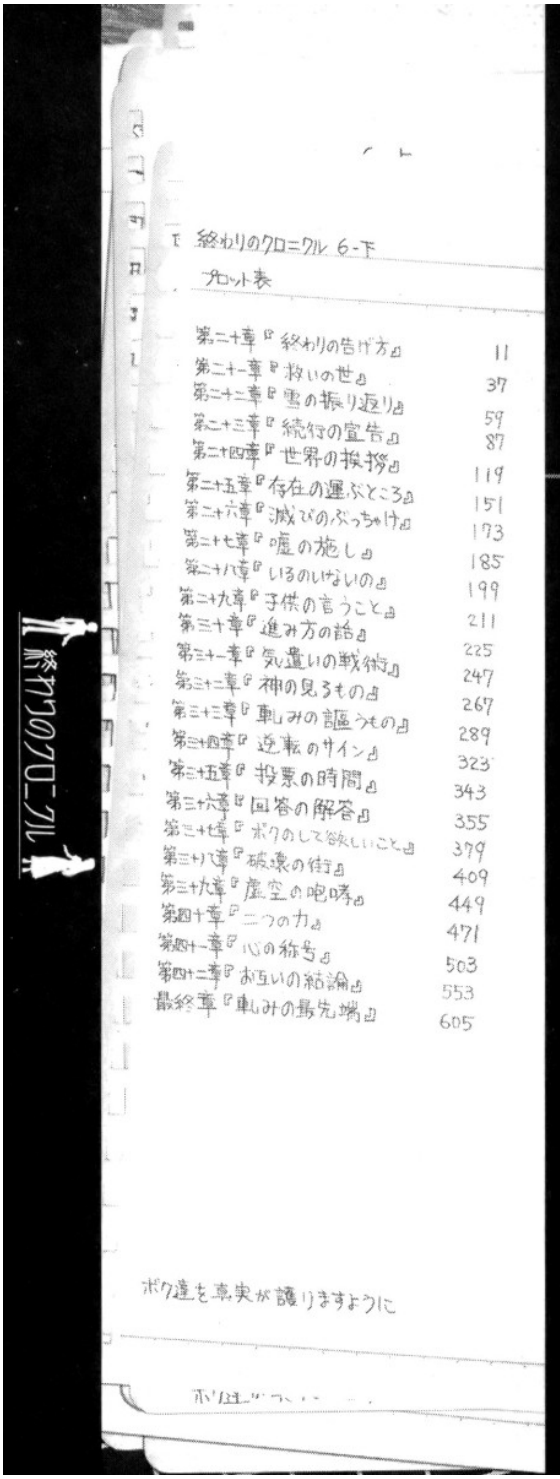
!! LE T'S GO VO TE !!
No objections allowed.
Ballot Box
WHITE ELECTION BUNNY
(TO INSIST YOU ARE PURE)
RED ELECTION BUNNY
(WHEN YOU ARE WILLING TO SPILL SOME BLOOD)

HAVE YOUR GEAR CAST A C-C-C-C-CALM VOTE FOR THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD.

"Do not think of it as a single vote. Even a vote from one as puny as you gains two or even five times the value when given to me. Ha ha ha."

※STUFFING THE BALLOT BOX IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN※

VOTING DAY IS 12/23.



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Chapter 20

“How to Speak of the End”

It has a beautiful appearance
It brings emotional collapse
That is why you want to hear about it
And to learn about it

●

Kazami and Izumo had planned to stay in Japanese UCAT for the night, so they were the first to learn Hiba had been carried to the medical room after his battle with Atsuta.

They had left the school and the year-end festival with Ooki and rushed inside Japanese UCAT while still wearing their school uniforms.

“So what do you think, Chisato? A small fry should really just run off after getting beat.”

“This small fry has a heroine. When she isn’t watching is exactly when he needs to show some real guts.”

“Is that how it works?” asked Izumo as he came to a stop in a white underground corridor. The medical room’s door opened at the press of a button, so they entered and continued to a row of beds in one corner.

“A man in black.”

Someone in black stood before one of the beds.

When he noticed them, he turned around. He had the narrow eyes and black hair of someone from continental Asia.

However, he gave a light bow before they could say anything.

“I quickly put together some treatment for him. I wanted to at least help him come to.”

“Who are you?”

Kazami and Izumo partially put up their guard and the man took a step forward.

“…”

The next thing they knew, he had passed by them.

Kazami also noticed her own hand was casually holding a business card.

Behind her, she heard the door opening and a voice.

“Please understand that Chinese UCAT has no intention of being your enemy.”

Kazami checked the name on the business card.

“Are you Doctor Chao’s-…?”

“It is a common surname in my country. That may be why we like to think of each other as one big family. …Anyway, please take care of the rest. If you need anything, feel free to ask. My country believes great and talented individuals are born in every land and we hope to continue an amicable relationship as the neighbor with the longest history in the world.”

Kazami heard the door close and footsteps moving down the corridor.

The only people left were Izumo, Kazami, and the bandaged individual sleeping on the bed before them.

“Hiba… You’ve been pretty manly for two days in a row now.”

The boy with a thin cloth placed over him instead of a blanket slowly opened his eyes.

His left arm was encased in a cast from the shoulder down and his right arm had an IV in it. His entire body was wrapped in charms and bandages, but the scrapes and the like had been ignored and all of the treatment was focused on the major injuries, be they external or internal.

He let out a quiet breath.

“Did I win?”

“Mikage was taken to the development department and she’s apparently secured to a bed there.”

“Wow.” Hiba gave a troubled smile, but his pain filled it with bitterness. “I can’t be with her just yet, can I?”

He laughed, but it sounded like coughing as he shook with pain.

He looked up at and spoke to Kazami who sighed to express her relief.

“I need to thank you two.”

“Why? It’s really creepy when you say that so suddenly. Did we do anything worth thanking us for?”

Kazami frowned in confusion.

“Ahhhh,” he said quietly. “You don’t know?”

He looked up at his two frowning upperclassmen.

“It’s about something perverted.”

Both boy and girl slammed a fist into the badly-injured patient.

“Ah, wait! No, no! Don’t hit me like that! I’m gonna bleed!”

They ignored him and continued the moderate barrage, but a sudden voice reached them from behind.

“Oh, dear. You certainly are full of energy.”

It was a female voice. They had heard it countless times, but they still replied with a question.

“Diana?”

Kazami turned around and found the woman standing by the wall in a suit.

Kazami faced her.

“Are you here to punch this idiot?”

“C-can’t you at least ask if she’s here to *visit* me, Kazami-san!?”

“You be quiet,” she snapped back before crossing her arms toward Diana.

She began wondering why the woman was here, but she quickly corrected that line of thinking.

…The answer is pretty obvious.

It was simple.

What was happening to them now? And what was happening around them?

Sayama and Shinjou had contacted them to say they had finished the Leviathan Road with 8th-Gear and had reached Sakai.

Harakawa had gone to the base and Heo had taken the 4th-Gear creature to visit Harakawa’s mother.

The common factor among them all was their preparation for the confrontation with Top-Gear and their search for the past.

Even if one tried to hide the past from them, they would not give up or back away.

Given that, why would Diana have come to them?

Kazami boldly looked straight ahead to face Diana head-on.

“For the moment, we’ve dealt with the fights 1st, 2nd, and 6th have picked with us. Heo will do something about 4th and Sayama called to say the negotiation with 8th is complete. All we’re waiting for is 3rd and Top-Gear.” She tapped the floor with the tips of her toes. “We’re also preparing to face Top-Gear.”

“And? What about it?”

Diana tilted her head and smiled, so Kazami showed her teeth in a smile of her own.

“I think it’s about time we heard what happened in the past.”

Kazami went on to sit on Hiba’s bed. She ignored the grunt of pain from behind her, placed an arm on the bed, and asked what she needed to ask without looking away from Diana.

She believed that this woman wanted her to ask this.

“What happened in that battle with Top-Gear?”

“Do you really think I’m going to tell you that?”

“Then why are you here?” Kazami shrugged. “This is the medical room. You don’t have to hide the painful things in here.”

“Even if I have already swallowed that pain?”

“Then you need a good doctor. A doctor that hopes to reach a place beyond where the patient is. …A doctor who will tell us the illness is no longer painful to them.”

Kazami kept her gaze flat as she spoke.

“We will oppose Top-Gear. Obligation to the past, concern for what we’ll be standing against, warnings, and a conscience have nothing to do with it. We decided to oppose Top-Gear, so we’ll do it. …We won’t stop just because you stay silent.”

“Even if that opposition will strip this Gear of a great many of its rights?”

“Either way, Top-Gear is going to start a fight in some way or another. To put it another way…”

Kazami chose her words carefully.

“The Concept War has yet to end for Low-Gear. …And yet you care so much for the past that you want to believe it’s already over. You think sealing away the past will bring an end to the fighting and keep us from losing anyone else.”

She took a breath.

“You’re in the way, Diana. The time for peace is over. No, it was never here in the first place. You simply turned a blind eye while your enemies never forgave you. So…”

“So?”

“Give us back your time, Diana.”

Kazami swung her legs forward and used the reactionary force to stand up.

The bed slid back and hit the next bed over and Hiba gave another cry of pain, but she paid it no heed.

“Connect your time to our time. Simple, isn’t it? We haven’t reached the peaceful afterschool hours yet. We’ve fallen behind in the lessons, so you just have to show us your notes. We’ll think for ourselves on the test. And then we too will see who has left the classroom and isn’t coming back.”

Kazami held out her palm as if to receive something and held it up high.

“If you have yet to graduate from the fight and you think we’re worthy of being your underclassmen, then show us your notes.”

●

The evening light washed over a hill from the left.

The right side of the hill was a cement-covered slope and the left side contained a line of houses bordering a cliff.

The scarlet light passed between or over the houses to shine on the hill and the people who stood there.

Currently, that was two people.

Shinjou walked ahead and Sayama followed from a half step behind.

Shinjou carried the Messenger of Wanambi on her head and she read a letter as she climbed the hill.

The letter was from her mother and sent to Sayama's parents. It was one of those they had found in the Kinugasa Library's Study the night before.

They were able to read the letters now that they had entered Sakai, so she was doing just that.

…My mom sent this here after moving to Top-Gear.

The text said nothing about why Shinjou Yukio had gone there.

According to Hajji, Top-Gear had invited her. They had wanted her to create a place for Low-Gear in Top-Gear.

The letter mentioned that she had been invited.

But it did not say what Shinjou Yukio herself had wanted out of it.

It only gave the result.

"I came to Top-Gear."

Another letter said the following:

"I am sure UCAT would be able to create that facility based on the concept creation theory I made. But as I'm sure you have noticed, I modified a lot of the theory. Asagi-kun, specifically because you know a certain amount about it, I doubt you will be able to make it. I'm sorry."

Shinjou Yukio mentioned that she had committed herself to defying Low-Gear, but Shinjou tilted her head.

…I'm just not feeling it.

Something about Shinjou Yukio's actions did not sit well with her.

It just did not seem like her to have opposed Low-Gear.

After investigating it all this far, Shinjou had come up with three mysteries that could explain why she felt that way.

First, what was the truth behind the three things that her mother had claimed Top-Gear feared?

Second, why had her mother gone to Top-Gear after discovering those things?

And third, why was Sayama Asagi unable to create the concept creation theory once her mother had modified it?

While thinking about those three things, she was able to make a certain guess.

…Because she knew what it was Low-Gear had, she may have realized Low-Gear had an advantage and decided to defect to Top-Gear.

That was the third thing besides Babel and the Biblical mythology.

"Something Low-Gear has and yet does not have."

…What if that was something important enough to decide who would win?

Had her mother realized what it was, feared its power, and defected? And had she left the modified concept creation theory to rob Low-Gear of its means of fighting so she could guide Low-Gear to Top-Gear?

That line of thinking seemed reasonable enough.

But it still did not sit well with her. This was nothing but her intuition, but…

…Was my mom that kind of person?

She had taken her information with her to the enemy and not even left her creation behind. That was a purely hostile act and showed her allegiance to the enemy.

The word "harsh" entered Shinjou's mind, but it did not sound right to her.

…Why not?

She suddenly recalled two photographs of the past.

In one, her young mother wore a school uniform below a cherry tree and gave a smile with real strength behind it. In the other, she gave a weak smile while leaving on a trip.

To apply the word "harsh"…

…I have to think about a version of my mother that doesn't fit either of those smiles.

But she still had nothing to reject that word. It was a fact that her mother had seemingly opposed Low-Gear.

And now, Shinjou was reading a letter from her. It began with Shinjou Yukio living in a house she was given in Top-Gear's Sakai.

It did not ask for a response and it mostly talked about everyday life and her job.

"In this world, I act as a concept creation theory advisor. However, I gave them the same documents I gave Asagi-kun and they too are attempting to construct a concept creation theory. It makes me feel a little cruel, but I want to see the people of this world create a concept creation facility under their own power. I also wish I could have brought the Messengers of Wanambi with me. The work here is tough.

“When they show up to ask for my advice or ask about Low-Gear’s culture and civilization, I try to speak with them. That may be why people have started coming to my house to talk. At first, it was only important people, but now researchers, students, and even the neighborhood children and old folks will show up. The UCAT here pays me as a visiting advisor, but I have used that money to prepare a large reception hall which is now open. It has a small table and chairs for the children and even an organ.

“The house is in the same place as the Sakai orphanage I used to live in and I’m wondering if I can eventually make it into a church. If I did, it would be this world’s very first church.”

Shinjou got the feeling that her mother had been enjoying herself.

She felt that was very like her mother, but that created another strong sense that something was wrong.

That sense once more came from what Hajji and the others had said about her mother.

There were some things she simply could not sense in this letter.

…Guilt and hostility.

Shinjou Yukio was acting like she had gone to Top-Gear as an evangelist. She showed no sign of guilt over her decision and she was telling those back home how much she was enjoying herself.

Shinjou could tell this was the strong smile, not the forced one.

Nothing in the letter had been rewritten and the ballpoint pen writing was smooth.

Shinjou’s experience from handwriting page after page of plot for her novel told her that her mother had really been into writing this.

Shinjou pulled out the next letter.

It described everyday life, such as how she would meet with people from Top-Gear’s UCAT and from her neighborhood to discuss Low-Gear’s Biblical mythology.

“It seems only children have the ability to sing a hymn without a care in the world.”

She said some of the adults would avoid the hymns as the “songs of the enemy”.

…What is this?

Shinjou had noticed something odd, but she was not sure what. Shinjou Yukio had supposedly been trying to guide Low-Gear to Top-Gear, so why was she teaching Top-Gear about the Bible and hymns before Low-Gear’s culture?

The next letter talked about work.

And it began unexpectedly.

“I have so much trouble with this world’s version of me.”

Eh? thought Shinjou as she came to a stop.

For Shinjou Yukio, “this world’s version of me” would be the male Shinjou Yukio.

And he was supposedly Shinjou’s father.

…Eh?

She had a single reason for the confusion that stopped her climb up the hill.

…She has trouble with him?

A moment later, Sayama almost toppled forward as he ran into her and wrapped his arms around her.

“Ah, y-you stopped so suddenly Shinjou-kun. I could not help but bump into you and… Ah! My hands just so happened to fall on your chest.”

He was annoying, so she raised her right heel and stomped on his toes.

“Nwohhh!” he shouted behind her. “Heh…heh heh. Even your heel feels wonderful, Shinjou-kun. But I would prefer it if you were more honest with yourself.”

She honestly ignored him and looked back to the letter. *Um,* she thought while refocusing her thoughts.

…I can’t understand this without switching to serious mode.

She breathed out and started back up the hill as she lowered her gaze to the letter.

The sun has gotten lower in the sky, she realized.

…But what did she mean when she said she has trouble with my dad?

The words continued as if to answer her.

“He was researching concept creation while developing weapons, so he was doing both my job and Asagi-kun’s job all on his own.”

Her father must have gone to speak with her mother as a member of Top-Gear’s UCAT.

“He always asks for my assistance. He is quite serious about it, but that’s why I have so much trouble with him.”

That was the last time the letter mentioned her father and the enthusiasm behind the words changed there.

“When I peeked inside UCAT I saw alternate versions of a lot of different people. I saw people I assume were alternate versions of Asagi-kun and Yume-san. They were developing concept weapons and philosopher’s stones. Also, Thunderson-san is a woman in this world and her husband is in the air force. In this world, Hiba-san develops mechanical dragons.”

The letter also mentioned that Top-Gear truly did not have a version of Babel.

It was mentioned casually, so Shinjou briefly looked up from the letter.

The top of the hill was a long way off, but the gate was visible.

She still had a few letters left, but she guessed this would be the last one she could read before reaching the orphanage.

…I can take a break after we get there.

She looked back down and read that her mother had made the church she wanted.

“I gathered the necessary funds and made a church. It was mostly financed by someone using the name ‘The Pair’s Daddy-Long-Legs’. They must be a very nice person. It even has a concert hall and a director lives in a detached house to manage the place. I need to thank the god that did not exist in this world but will soon be created here.”

Shinjou remembered the past scene of Shinjou Yukio on a snowy night she had seen in the Kinugasa Library’s Study. The woman had been in a park and it had contained a building Shinjou had assumed was an orphanage.

…That was what my mom had built in Top-Gear.

Was that building the same as the orphanage that slept below the earth after it had collapsed?

Had she created an original in Top-Gear or had she copied Low-Gear?

“What kind of world was Top-Gear for my mom?”

Curious about that, she looked up the hill, but then Sayama spoke to her from behind.

“Speaking of that, Heo-kun said something felt off about Top-Gear’s sky, didn’t she?”

“Oh, yeah. She did, didn’t she?”

Heo had indeed said something felt off about the sky.

She said Osaka’s sky had seemed awfully dark from the snowy orphanage.

And during the past of Osaka’s destruction, she said the stars had suddenly become visible from behind the dark clouds.

“Shinjou Yukio must have seen the source of that feeling when she stood here in Sakai.”

Sayama sounded like he knew the answer, so Shinjou turned back toward him.

Before she could ask what he meant, she heard him speak and saw motion.

“Shinjou-kun, do you remember what Tamiya Shino-kun said? She gave the name of Top-Gear’s concept creation facility. It was a name associated with the ark of Biblical mythology. …That name was Noah.”

As if responding to his words, Baku rose up on Sayama’s head.

The creature seemed to be taking some kind of stance as he faced the spot where Shinjou had once cried.

Baku was looking past the site of the collapse.

“…!”

In an instant, the scenery changed.

She did not feel like she was falling into a dream of the past like before. The dotted sky was quickly swapped out with another scene.

…The blue sky!

●

It was a summer sky.

A woman stood in front of a church building situated on the edge of a cliff.

She had her back to Shinjou, the blue sky was visible beyond the cliff, a city stretched on below, and the ocean lay beyond that.

However…

…Dark clouds?

A sort of shadow was visible in Osaka’s sky to the north.

A massive object that had to measure over fifteen kilometers from east to west floated above Osaka.

At first, Shinjou was not sure what it was.

She could visually comprehend what she was seeing, but she had yet to fully grasp the situation.

It was a boat.

It was an aerial ship surrounded by a white outer shell and it was large enough to produce clouds when its surface collided with the air.

This was Noah.

The woman standing below the summer sky was looking to that city-sized ark.

And Shinjou came to a sudden understanding.

…This is what seemed off to Heo!

It made sense now. On the night of the destruction, it had been this ark hiding the sky, not dark clouds. The stars had become visible because the ship had moved.

And on that snowy night they had seen in the Kinugasa Library, it had been this ark and not the snow clouds darkening Osaka's sky.

…In that case…

During the battle in Top-Gear's Osaka, Sayama's father and the others had been making their way toward Noah, Top-Gear's UCAT had likely used Noah as their base, and if the negative concepts had gone out of control inside Noah, Shinjou's mother would have been there too.

…Was Noah the true scene of the final battle!?

The past did not answer her shouted question.

But it did move. Shinjou's mother turned toward her.

…Ah.

The woman's long hair and skirt fluttered in the sunlight.

Shinjou gasped as her expression came into view.

It was a weak smile.

And Shinjou Yukio opened her mouth to speak with the smiling blue sky and Noah behind her.

"Unfortunately, I can't give you my absolute cooperation. I believe I made that clear when I defected. I said I would keep my assistance to the bare minimum to help preserve Top-Gear's dignity."

She was speaking past Shinjou, which meant…

…There's someone behind me?

Shinjou could turn around just by thinking here, so she did so as if spinning on her heel and she faced the same direction as her mother.

Behind her, she saw someone in a lab coat standing in the center of the sunny summer park.

It was a slender man with his black hair tied back behind his neck. The eyes behind his glasses were fairly sharp.

"So you will not assist us?"

Despite his words, his tone made it clear he had fully expected this.

However, Shinjou noticed a nametag on the chest of his lab coat.

…Noah Concept Development Department Director – Shinjou Yukio.

She did not immediately think of this as her father. He was not yet in that position here, and…

…My mom said she had trouble with him.

When he turned around, a sudden thought came to Shinjou: perhaps he was the same.

And the female Yukio's voice shouted after the lab coat.

"There are some who understand what I'm doing. I was able to build this church…and even a concert hall. This was all thanks to the kind donations of many people. So…so my answer will not change no matter how many times you come here. I handed over my documents and I listened to what you had to say, but I cannot provide absolute cooperation. No matter how many times you come here while pretending to understand what I'm doing, my answer will not change. It won't!"

Her voice pursued him, but the lab coat did not turn around and his departing legs did not stop.

As if taking his place, several footsteps and voices entered through the gate into the park.

They belonged to children.

They were led by a kindergarten teacher and they ran toward Shinjou as if flooding through the gate.

Countless voices filled the park, greetings were exchanged, and Shinjou's father slipped out to the side of the gate so as not to be in the way. He then began walking to the city below, with his back to Shinjou.

Shinjou looked past the remaining woman and the arriving children and she watched him leave.

…That's my dad?

She understood that both her parents had their own point of view based on their positions.

Her mother wanted to work as an advisor while providing an understanding of Low-Gear by spreading the Biblical mythology. Her father wanted her help for the coming final battle.

…He's serious, so she has trouble with him.

Maybe they're both that way, she realized.

In an instant, the past switched over.

It was primarily the color that switched over.

The heavens transformed from the blue sky into a dark red sky.

In other words, it transformed from a peaceful summer to the night of destruction.

●

Destruction filled the sky, dark clouds covered the earth, and the gaps in the clouds gave glimpses of the color red filling the surface.

Lightning flashed atop the dark clouds and the heavens above were in motion.

The starry ceiling was twisting and distorting.

Sayama's mind looked to that distortion.

…Is the world growing negative!?

With this land at the center, the world was being compressed from the edges until it vanished.

Most likely, he qualified to himself. *The people of this world and all other life here are being destroyed.*

This was not like the other Gears that had fallen to the negative side after losing their concepts. This world was still supported by its concepts, but it had grown negative as if turning everything inside-out. In that instant, all things in that world would have grown negative and vanished without time to suffer.

Anything that managed to retain its form would be annihilated once its destruction ratio grew too high and there was only one way anyone had survived.

…The people who had resistant philosopher's stones from other Gears.

That would be the people who had survived the first impact of negativity inside facilities like Noah.

As the deluge of negativity assaulted Top-Gear, Noah still existed.

The giant white boat seemed to sink into the dark clouds.

Above, within, and directly below the clouds, mechanical dragons darted about and witches flew on metal brooms.

On the surface below, people in armored uniforms clashed and exchanged attacks of various powers.

Sayama's viewpoint allowed him to look down on it all.

"…!?"

But his mind suddenly picked up speed as if being swept away.

What? he wondered just before realizing what provided his footing. It was a mechanical dragon. His mind stood on the blue back armor and two nostalgic forms accompanied him there.

They wore white armored uniforms and tore through the wind as the dragon flew.

…My-…

The woman crouched down as if clinging to the mechanical dragon's armor.

"A-chan! Standing up like that is dangerous!!"

"I agree, Yume-san, but there is simply too much I have to see."

The man, Asagi, brushed up his hair and faced forward.

Noah was visible between the clouds and the massive ark resembled a floating island.

The mechanical dragon emitted a voice from within the roaring wind.

"Asagi, I'm going to get in close once to determine the exact point and the air currents. I'll let you off on the second approach."

"Testament. Please do. And make sure you all prepare for the reverse seal. I will definitely be back."

"Testament," replied the dragon. "I'm sure Itaru is managing the preparations."

"He pushes himself too hard. I kind of wish we hadn't brought him along."

Yume tugged on Asagi's sleeve and frowned.

"You were the one that decided to do that, A-chan. Half the responsibility lies with you."

"I know. Testament. Understood. And…"

Sayama heard a certain statement leave his father's mouth.

"I will bear the responsibility for destroying this world."

…So it is true.

Those words brought a sensation of pain to his chest.

Just as Hajji had said, his father had destroyed Top-Gear. His father himself had just admitted it.

When we face Top-Gear, I cannot let myself look away from this truth, he swore to himself and thus accepted it.

He then noticed that his mother was still tugging on his father's sleeve.

"Are you sure you'll be okay on your own, A-chan? Will you really bring her back? Will you bring Yukio back to Low-Gear?"

There was a slight tremble in her voice.

"And will you bring Yukio's child back, too?"

Asagi faced his wife, nodded once, and smiled.

"Yes," he said. "Don't worry. I'll bring everyone back. And all before Mikoto wakes up."

…!!

Sayama's mind gasped just as the mechanical dragon spoke again.

"I appreciate the show of familial love, but we're about to the party hall. Can you see it, Asagi? If the surface says 'caution' in the Osaka dialect, then place your arm at your side and swing it outwards for a tsukkomi salute."

"Why do you of all people know about that kind of local custom?"

Meanwhile, Sayama's vision made a great leap. The dragon had flown upwards as if making a jump.

In only an instant, he experienced an endless series of movement.

The dragon twisted to the right, used the motion to fly into the clouds, and slipped through a group of enemy mechanical dragons.

…!!

Bursting shells placed blossoming fire in the air, charms thrown by his mother deflected enemy shots, and his father faced straight ahead.

Without time to catch their breath, they left the clouds, left the wind, and approached a great white barrier.

It was Noah.

That manmade ark hung motionless in the sky like a wall.

The dragon flew just off its surface and ascended. Its acceleration left behind the pursuing enemy dragons as it flew into the sky. It flew into the heavens where Noah was no longer visible.

In that instant, Sayama looked in the same direction as his father and realized something.

Below them, someone stood beyond a large window on the top level of Noah.

It was the two Shinjous in lab coats with a white automaton behind them.

"A-chan! That was…!"

"I know! Hurry, Thunderson! Hurry, family of thunder!"

Sayama's father turned back toward Noah, wrinkled his brow, and opened his mouth for a shout of protest.

"Those waiting for a villain are within the unwanted ark!"

The man's voice rang out as Sayama was thrown into the sky of the past.

His vision instantly grew dark and he began to awaken to the present.

During that process, he thought.

…Shinjou-kun's parents had separated themselves so much, so why were they together?

And how had his father and the others destroyed that world?

There were so many questions and he was sure he would only find more. He reached his left hand out toward the darkness. It appeared empty, but reality awaited him beyond it.

He was certain he would gain something important there.

●

Meanwhile in American UCAT at Yokota, the dream sand gave Harakawa a dream of the battle in Top-Gear's Osaka. In the Akigawa hospital, Heo was told what Harakawa's mother had seen. In Japanese UCAT, Kazami, Izumo, and Hiba watched as Diana opened her lips.

"That was a night that not even we fully understand."

She smiled bitterly as she continued.

"How about I tell you of the time that began on that night and will hopefully connect to the present?"

Chapter 21

“World of Salvation”

It is not darkness you should reach for
Nor is it light
What sound can you simply believe in?

●

The boy's father was a sniper.

The boy had been told his father belonged to a special unit under the command of the air force and had fought in battles that were not publicly known.

That had been half true and half false.

The boy's father had indeed been a sniper and had belonged to a special unit in the American military.

But the battles he had fought were meant to mop up remnant factions who wished to protest the result of battles fought in other worlds. The unit he had belonged to was a global one known as UCAT and his weapon…

…What kind of machinegun is that?

In a dream of the past, the boy saw his father wearing a blue armored uniform. The man's right hand held a machinegun encased in a blue cowling, his left hand held a handgun of the same color, and he ran through a great number of battlefields.

The machinegun's bullets trailed white light as they flew. They would attack enemies hiding behind cover and pursue them wherever they might go.

The many high-speed bullets tore through armor, prosthetics, and even cover.

Everyone called him the North Wind. He was the representative member of their unit and their reliable foundation.

One day, the base received a visit by the pilot of a blue mechanical dragon belonging to a Japanese organization. The pilot had originally been a colleague of the boy's father, but he had joined the Japanese. His home country had not taken kindly to that, but the base saw things differently and they all helped the man with the specialized mechanical dragon maintenance the Japanese could not do.

As the mechanical dragon stuck partially out of the hangar to bathe in the sun, the boy's father wore a work outfit and spoke to the pilot who was similarly dressed.

They had both removed their shirts and tossed a can of beer to each other.

They chatted about a few topics such as what restaurants along National Route 16 had gone out of business. Afterwards, the pilot looked into the sky and spoke to the boy's father.

"How long are you going to keep this up, Alberto?"

"I don't know. What about you, James Thunderson?"

"I'm leaving in '99. Maria's parents' house back in the States has been sitting empty. It's out in the country with a great view of the sky. There's a small church there, too. The scenery will probably be exactly the same a hundred years from now."

"You get sick of a nice atmosphere after three days, but you get used to a bad one in the same amount of time."

"You're right." replied the pilot. "Try to get home a little more often. Don't you think your kid would like it if you came back with a book for him?"

"I don't think that at all. Which is why I'll buy a bookcase for him before heading home next. That's all I have to say about that."

"This guy…"

Hearing Thunderson, the boy's father smiled bitterly and lay down in the mechanical dragon's shadow.

"I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"Unlike you, I don't have a dragon to ride around in. When you get down to it, I just have myself. I could die at any time. But I let my emotions get the better of me and now I have something I care for. Biggest mistake of my life."

"So you don't want to be with them because it will be easier this way once you die?"

"That's right," said the boy's father. "Luckily, Yui's good at making protective charms from philosopher's stones. It's a lot easier knowing she can protect our kid without me. A great wife is a wonderful thing. …She told your wife how to make the protective charms she's made with the extra philosopher's stones she swiped, right?"

The pilot sighed as he spoke.

"Hey, don't you want to think about something a little more cheerful while you're still alive? I don't plan to die as I fight, so I'm worried the people like you are going to jump onto the train tracks on a whim someday."

"You coward. You should try planning to die sometime. You can do anything once you do."

"I got past that kind of thing once I submitted my marriage registration at city hall."

"Yeah, and the hell that awaits after that is nothing but trouble."

The boy's father smiled bitterly and covered his face with his right hand.

The hand hiding his bitter smile was hardened by the burns and scars of firing his guns so often.

"Having someone so important to you really is nothing but trouble," he said slowly. "Take today for example. Now I have to go buy a bookcase on the way home."

●

The past that Heo listened to came from what Yui had seen and what had been learned from the recordings in her father's mechanical dragon.

The biggest problem in the confrontation with Top-Gear was what Sayama Asagi had said first after gathering them all in Japanese UCAT late at night.

"I will destroy Top-Gear by activating the negative concepts they are producing in Noah."

He received some protests, but he told them it had already begun.

"We of course must rescue the survivors of their world, but the negativity will reach our neighboring world which will also turn Low-Gear negative if nothing is done. We must seal that negativity."

He had told those who would remain to remain and those who would go to go.

He had said Top-Gear was already being destroyed and that all responsibility fell on him.

"After all, I am the one who activated the negative concepts being created there. I altered the data I sent to Shinjou Yukio as she worked to create them."

Heo was confused by what Yui said Asagi had said. Had Sayama Asagi sent data on the negative concepts to Shinjou Yukio who had defected to Top-Gear?

When Heo asked, Yui nodded and said that Shinjou Yukio had sent a letter explaining that she was creating the negative concepts so Low-Gear could join Top-Gear. After they had received that letter, Asagi had gone back into Babel and taken data on the negative concepts.

However, he had claimed to have altered that data so they would activate upon being created.

Yui told Heo what all of them had to have been thinking when he had told them that.

"We knew he had to have had some reason for it. …And he told us to believe in the final result regardless of what we might have thought at the moment."

According to him, belief in the result, no matter what it might be, was a promise.

And so they had all gone with him. By the time they had arrived, Top-Gear had been on the verge of collapse and Noah had only survived by ejecting the power of the uncontrollable negative concepts outside of itself.

Top-Gear had been trying to stop Noah by using the positive concepts inside Noah to return the world to normal. They hoped doing so would bring everything back to life.

The Low-Gear group had been there to seal Noah away and prevent it from affecting Low-Gear too, so they had ended up in conflict. Top-Gear had claimed Low-Gear was there to erase the true world.

Most of those inside Noah had collapsed from the negative concepts, but the survivors were either heading out to battle or escaping to Low-Gear, giving priority to the helpers from other Gears and the few children that remained.

An air battle had developed in Top-Gear's skies while fierce fighting had broken out on the path leading to Noah.

"We were there too."

Yui's husband, Alberto, had fired his sniper rifle from the roof of a building they had secured.

As gunfire shook the roof, a friend of his had leaped up in a single bound and introduced himself as Hiba Ryuuichi.

Hiba Ryuuichi had brought a girl with him.

"This is this world's version of my child. I don't know where her parents are."

Hiba had given his weapon to the trembling girl and left her with Yui and Alberto.

He had then spoken to the girl who had looked unwell and trembled. He had told her everyone would know he had vouched for her if she had his sword.

Hiba Ryuuichi had then returned to the battle, but Yui had noticed that he was holding his right side with a bloodstained hand.

Yui said she did not know exactly what had happened after that.

She knew that there had been a long battle, that Thunderson's mechanical dragon had flown through the sky, and that Sayama Asagi had boarded Noah which was nearly abandoned by that point. He had gone there to rescue Shinjou Yukio and her child.

When Yui had prepared to evacuate with the others, Alberto had said he was staying.

"Japanese UCAT is carrying out a reverse seal…and they need me as one of the Five Great Peaks."

The reverse seal was something Sayama Asagi had secretly put together before entering Top-Gear.

It was developed from the sealing techniques used to seal 10th-Gear's divine dragon and 2nd-Gear's Yamata.

Sayama Asagi had obtained those dragon sealing techniques from the Kinugasa Document he had found at the Kinugasa residence.

Accusers stood in four or eight directions and combined the concepts of several Gears to seal the dragon.

But once it was sealed, the negative concepts would continue to activate within it and would eventually break through the seal.

That was why Sayama Asagi had reworked the seal in one way.

“Simply put, the positions around the dragon making up the seal are reversed to reverse the entire structure of the seal.”

By doing that…

“A normal seal restrains the target because the seal ‘exists’, but when that is reversed, the seal makes it so the target ‘never existed’ because the seal ‘does not exist’. In other words, the target and the seal are sent to the farthest reaches of nothingness.”

Alberto had been in charge of one of the four corners of the square seal. He was to create a barrier and maintain it.

His position had been in western Osaka. From there, he had been able to look up at Noah and see across the battlefield.

The Five Great Peaks were those in charge of the seal like that. Sayama Asagi had been their leader and the others were Hiba Ryuuichi, Diana Zonburg, James Thunderson, and Alberto Northwind.

Sayama Asagi had given the authoritative decree from the center, directly below Noah, Hiba had been to the north, Alberto to the west, Thunderson to the south, and Diana to the east.

The barrier would normally be driven into the ground to establish its existence, but they had reversed that and emitted it into the empty heavens.

However, what did it mean to eliminate Noah which also contained the positive concepts?

Yui had heard Diana’s voice over the radio.

“Will we be destroying this world!? If the positive concepts restrain the activated negative concepts, it’s possible we can stop this world’s destruction!”

Hiba’s voice had answered her.

He had sounded horribly out of breath.

“But what if we can’t do that? If we’re too late, it will mean the destruction of our children too!”

However, he had almost immediately clicked his tongue.

“Sorry, German witch. It was cruel of me to bring up the topic of children, wasn’t it?”

“No, I know what you’re trying to say and I do think it’s too late for that. I may have been trying to personally escape responsibility for that crime. But…”

Diana had hesitated and another voice had cut in.

It was Thunderson’s as he piloted his mechanical dragon through the sky.

He had spoken only three words.

“Let’s do it.”

“Thunderson!?”

That was the first time Yui had heard Alberto shout in anger.

He had grabbed the communicator with his eyebrows raised.

“Are you sure? Are you sure you want to hope for this and face what it means? What about your kid!? Your kid will inherit the world, but she’ll also inherit the hatred of every other Gear!”

“Ha ha. I have no intention of using my daughter as a shield to escape responsibility for what must be done.”

Thunderson had laughed cheerfully and the sounds of his atmospheric battle had reached them over the radio. After a delay, they had also heard explosions high up in the heavens.

Those low sounds had acted as a bell to indicate the battle was still in progress and Thunderson had continued speaking.

“It’s too late for this world and it’s filled with screams. The only question is who’s going to finish the job.”

“Even if that means earning everyone’s hatred? I thought you liked to view things positively!?”

“I do.” His tone had been the one he had always used when shrugging. “Listen, everyone. If we don’t earn that hatred now, we’ll lose everything. But if we can avoid losing even just a little bit, then it’s possible that hatred can be eliminated one day.”

So…

“So I see only one option. Are you going to make me place all that hatred on my daughter alone? Don’t worry, Alberto. My daughter has the protective charm my wife learned how to make from yours. And she also has the protection of happiness. I’m sure she can overcome all of this.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Are you trying to say parents own their children or something!?”

“I’m not saying that,” Thunderson had replied. “But this world is going to be destroyed one way or another. And all because we…yes, both our Low-Gear versions and our Top-Gear versions didn’t make it in time. And to make sure our world isn’t taken out with it, we have no choice but to destroy this place. In other words, my daughter is going to be the daughter of someone who destroyed a world either way.”

He had continued from there.

“So if I don’t force this onto her, she will still inherit that hatred or have it forced onto her by someone else. That’s why I’m well aware that I’m forcing that hatred onto her, Alberto. That way, she is free to hate me.”

“I doubt your daughter will hate you.”

“Then maybe she’ll be able to live her life without hating anyone. That would be wonderful.”

He had paused for a breath.

“I know this makes me a terrible parent. …Alberto, I went home to visit my wife as infrequently as you, but I wasn’t as ashamed of it. That means I was even more worthless than you.”

“Are you sure you want to be a target of hatred, Thunderson?”

“I don’t want to. Of course I don’t. No one would want to be hated…except maybe Sayama,” Thunderson had said. “But someone has to do this. Someone has to minimize the hatred so it isn’t directed at everyone. If we do this and are hated for it, it might mean our world won’t be hated. And I feel like I can act tough right now, so let me say something.”

He had taken a breath before continuing.

“My name is James Thunderson. I am of the family of thunder. Even if they are hated, both the thunder and the wind will fly through the sky. And one day, the people will be forced to accept them and choose to be with them. …Just as airplane wings need the wind to take flight, the hated wind is also what carries people into the distance.”

The people around Yui had nodded and begun to withdraw.

Everyone had looked to Noah and realized something.

The enemy had vanished from around them.

Had that enemy been destroyed or had they escaped to Low-Gear?

Heo heard a third possibility from Yui.

“They had gone to attack the defending dragon in order to destroy the square barrier.”

●

Harakawa saw four pillars supporting the barrier that surrounded Noah in the collapsing sky.

As Roger withdrew and as Chao’s four brothers turned back, they saw a pillar of white light piercing the heavens in the four cardinal directions.

A curtain of light connected the pillars and formed a thin box of light.

“When that is completed, will the space inside be sent to the void?”

Diana’s eastern pillar was located on an elevated field east of Osaka and it was near the gate they had entered through.

A few dozen people in white armored uniforms were gathered near the gate of darkness opened on that elevated ground.

One of them was a skinny elderly man in a white combat coat.

…So he wasn’t wearing those eccentric glasses at this point.

The elderly man showed no fear of the destruction or the light of the sealing barrier, but there was visible sweat on his face.

Thunderson’s voice came from a communicator in the simple camp next to him.

“The barrier pillar has achieved eighty percent stability all the way to the top.”

Reports of similarly high stability came from the other three directions.

Harakawa then saw several glowing spirals rising within the four rising pillars.

…Is that a circle? Or is it writing?

What had started as circles had stacked up on top of each other and extended like a spring.

But Harakawa also saw explosive flames and light rising near the pillars.

The battle was continuing.

Everyone on the elevated ground gasped and the man in charge of communications turned toward the elderly man in the white coat.

The ends of his eyebrows were lowered and he hesitated to speak.

“Itaru-san is still inside. He’s with the Hiba camp.”

“He isn’t going to make it in time, then.”

That was all the elderly man said before facing forward again.

They could only watch as countless sparks flew.

However, a voice did reach them over the communicator. It sounded triumphant even as it gasped for breath.

“This is Thunderson. Once the barrier is fully established, I’ll pick up Alberto, Hiba, and Itaru before heading back.”

“Ha ha,” came Alberto’s muffled laughter. “That’s one hell of a dangerous taxi. I don’t really like heights all that much, though.”

“A real man can confidently cross his arms when standing up high.”

Hiba's comment was answered by agreement and the sound of gunfire. At the same time, Harakawa's mind saw sparks flying in the distance.

Even as the world fell apart, the battle continued.

●

Diana leaned against the white wall and spoke.

…Back then…

She spoke accurately and clearly as she thought back.

"On that night when the ending came, I used my broom to fly back to the gate created east of Osaka."

When she had landed, her steel broom had fallen apart as if to say it had done its duty. She had then joined the others.

The camp had had protective concepts set up and she had been fighting nearby, so her body had been less affected by the negative concepts. Yui and the others had left that protective barrier, so several of them had already been complaining of health problems.

There had been a trembling girl holding Hiba's sword in the camp, so she had been sent back first.

Behind them, the pillar of light had grown so bright that the writing inside could not be seen.

That meant Sayama had given the decree from the center of the sealing barrier.

Once the light of the pillars had reached its peak, the same level of light had come from the sealing barrier itself.

…The inside and outside of the barrier are being separated and the inside is being sent to the void.

The void was a territory of true nothingness. It had no time, no space, and nothing else.

But something had concerned Diana as the seal had reached completion.

"UCAT Director Ooshiro, is anyone still inside the barrier!?"

"Sayama-kun and Yume-kun are. As are the other three Peaks."

"Then what are you doing!? We need to put together a rescue team!"

A voice had answered her from the communicator. It had been Thunderson's hoarse voice.

"Don't get hysterical, Diana."

"…"

"I'm picking up Hiba and the others now. Once this is over, we'll head back there. You all need to hurry up and escape to Low-Gear. Wait around too long and we'll beat you back."

Diana had then heard Alberto's voice over the communicator.

"Hey, James. What are you gonna do once you get back?"

"How about we gather our families together and have a Christmas party? It'll be our kids' first time to meet each other, won't it? And Alberto."

"What?"

"There's something I've always wanted to apologize for. I shouldn't have gotten after you for not being with your family."

He had paused for a breath.

"But the only reason my cowardly heart felt you needed to be with your family was because I wanted to be with mine. …We never seemed to get along, but deep down, we really wanted the same thing."

That was when Diana had seen something.

Inside the glowing white sealing barrier, figures had approached on the surface and through the air.

Three people had been approaching on land: Sayama Asagi, Yume, and an unfamiliar girl.

The philosopher's stone that Asagi and Yume had brought to protect against negative concepts had been hanging from the running girl's neck.

…Is that Yukio's daughter?

Asagi had lagged behind as he let his wife and the girl run ahead. The light behind him had been too strong to tell exactly why. It had looked like he was holding something in both arms, but he had refused to let go of it.

As soon as Diana had decided it was something Yukio had given him, a shockwave had raced along the elevated land.

Diana had turned toward the rumbling in surprise and seen what was arriving by air: a blue mechanical dragon.

Its armor had been almost entirely smashed or ripped away and the cockpit had lost its canopy. Its wing had no longer been enough to supply lift and it had only remained flying because of its thrust and floating concept.

Everyone had run over, expecting for Thunderson, Hiba, and the others to disembark.

However, Diana and the others had seen something else.

Most of the cockpit had been smashed and had only maintained just enough space for a single injured person to be flown back on autopilot.

"Itaru."

Itaru's right leg had been broken, but the tears streaming down his face had not been from the pain. He had lowered the hands covering his face and he had opened his mouth.

"By the time he reached us, he said the dragon was at its limit and could only carry maybe one person."

Diana remembered Itaru asking why.

"Why did he give an order that meant his own death!?"

●

Three sets of eyes looked up at the crumbling world.

As the city and earth fell to pieces around them, the three men sat with their backs against a broken cement wall.

They had all been injured at their posts and they were all shedding blood onto the ground.

One of the three, Alberto, noticed something in the sky.

He held his broken gun to support himself while he looked up. The sealing barrier's light was reaching its climax.

"Hey, Hiba, Thunderson. Noah's about to be blown away."

A man with a broken sword in his lap sat to his right and a man staring motionlessly upwards sat to his left.

Both of them said "yeah" as if sighing or falling asleep and they laughed bitterly at their unison.

They laughed as if forcing all the air out of their lungs.

Thunderson then spoke.

"I need to get back. …I told my daughter I'd go jogging with her in the morning."

Hiba gave a meaningless nod.

"I wonder how my son will do? Will he take care of her?"

No one asked who he meant by "her".

But the three men suddenly heard a sound.

It was a song.

"That's a hymn. It's Silent Night."

They did not know who was singing, but they listened to the song.

"It's too bad. Noah's gonna vanish before they finish singing. And yet it was made for people."

"It apparently has a control automaton, but I feel sorry for the thing. It was made as an ark, but it couldn't save anyone."

"Then we need to get back before it's over. …I bought a bookcase. Not for me, but for my son."

"Then get moving," said Thunderson.

Alberto nodded.

"You get moving, too."

He turned toward Thunderson, but the man did not move.

Hiba was not moving either

"Yeah," muttered Alberto. "Let's get back to the people waiting for us."

The light before his eyes grew brighter than white.

"…"

Alberto never closed his eyes, but he could no longer see.

●

The sun sank beyond a mountain range.

Its final light created a group of shadows.

Those shadows were cast by gravestones on a mountain slope.

The backlight was too bright to read the name on one gravestone, but someone stood motionless and wordless before it.

Speaking in a graveyard was a job for the living.

"That is what happened ten years ago, Sf."

"Why did you tell me that now, Itaru-sama?"

Itaru fixed his black collar in the evening sun and turned his sunglasses toward Sf who stood a step behind him.

"Because you have no emotions, Sf. I know I won't have to hear any nonsense from you."

"Tes. Then that is a product of my ability. Thank you very much. I have determined German UCAT created me to be exactly what you desired. …And the acknowledgement that what I am always telling you is not nonsense means I can give you five times the thanks."

"I see you also have five times the ability to misinterpret my words."

“Tes. I had recently begun to worry that I might actually be defective, but that must be due to my increased ability to misinterpret what you have said. …My relief function is working at five times normal.”

“My annoyance is accelerating at five times normal too. What should I do about that?”

“Tes.” Sf pointed to the setting sun. “You can cry in that direction. It seems Ooshiro-sama jumps up and down after he cries.”

Itaru ignored her and slowly faced forward.

The backlight made the name “Sayama” difficult to make out on the gravestone.

New flowers were laid out in front of it and water had been splashed on it.

Sf stepped up next to him.

“Itaru-sama, I have a question about the role of Sayama Asagi and a few others in what you told me.”

Itaru crouched down, bent his left knee, and then slowly bent the right.

“To be honest, I don’t really know. I can make a number of guesses, though. By the time I arrived at the escape zone, I had lost consciousness from blood loss and I was in the hospital by the time I came to.”

He sighed, brushed a hand through his gray hair, and corrected the position of the flowers.

The gravestones that had been hidden below them were carved with the names Sayama Kaoru, Asagi, and Yume.

“Sayama Asagi had brought a metal case containing the left Georgius and he handed it over to Sayama Yume. And…it seems he didn’t escape the sealing barrier in time.”

“Then he is not buried below this gravestone, is he?” commented Sf. “But why did he have Georgius?”

“There’s a theory about that. Top-Gear must have learned Professor Kinugasa had a Georgius in Low-Gear and so created one of their own in Noah.”

He turned to Sf who looked to the grave and slowly pulled a bouquet of flowers from below her skirt. She then spoke slowly to him.

“This is the bouquet I prepared. You always place the flowers so the names are visible, but I have determined the people sleeping here would not want that kind of help. I thought I would hide the names for them.”

“Is that how you imagine it?”

“No, automatons cannot imagine. Besides, if you remove what is blocking the vision of those who sleep here, they will naturally wake up. Logically, the reason you told me about the past today and why you go back over it in your mind again and again is because the past keeps waking up. And…”

Sf spoke as she held out the flowers.

“I have determined a mystery still remains. How did Sayama-sama’s father obtain Georgius’s case? What happened inside Noah? Also…”

She hid the flowers behind herself.

“What kind of people were Sayama-sama’s parents and Shinjou-sama’s parents?”

Chapter 22

“Looking Back in the Snow”

As if afraid of the white snow
My voice seeks the darkness
But the voice of the darkness refers to me as snow

●

A large room was decorated for Christmas.

Even the sign in the cafeteria that said Soukou House had chains of colored paper hanging from it and those colorful chains covered the ceiling as well.

Below the white lights, Shinjou sat on a white bench with notebooks and letters spread out before her and Sayama held a cellphone to his ear.

Shinjou saw the director walk past the cafeteria entrance, so she gave a quick bow.

The woman nodded back and Shinjou smiled before facing forward.

The documents in front of her were the records of Shinjou Yukio that she had not had time to read before or that they had brought with them. The director had found more since Shinjou's last visit, so there was a small pile of notebooks, albums, and letters on the table.

…It's nice being able to learn as much as I can.

She felt like she was filling the gaps left inside herself.

The others seemed to be taking action in their own ways and Sayama was currently on the phone with Heo.

It had been a long call, Sayama occasionally spoke up so Shinjou could hear, and Heo was telling him what Harakawa's mother had told her about the past. However, that was reaching its end.

"I see. Then are you about to head home, Heo-kun? …Yes, take care."

Sayama ended the call and Shinjou turned toward him.

"It sounds like they're having trouble over there. Did Ryuuji-kun do something again?"

"Yes." Sayama nodded and crossed his arms. "From what Heo-kun said, he renegotiated with 2nd-Gear by letting a 2nd-Gear man penetrate him with his sword, which produced a lot of blood. Currently, he is stuck in bed, defenseless against all the 'attacks' the others are sending his way."

Shinjou frowned and the two of them thought on what he had said.

"Was part of that a euphemism?"

"Shinjou-kun, are you suggesting that the Hiba boy's heart has migrated to the side of men?"

"N-no, of course not. I was only kidding. Heo must have said it wrong."

"But would she really say anything wrong to us after the 'thisp' incident?"

They fell silent for about a minute but eventually cleared their throats.

Deciding not to think about anything unpleasant, Shinjou gathered together the documents on the table.

"Come to think of it, Sayama-kun, you were speaking with the director earlier, weren't you? Do you mind if I ask what about?"

"Oh, she was only talking about my grandfather."

He brought a hand to his chest and smiled bitterly.

"I only confirmed that he did know how to keep up the appearance of being a good person."

"He was apparently the one who delivered my mom's letters."

"Heh heh heh. Being someone's gofer is perfect for that wicked old man. Work until you die. Although I suppose it is too late for that."

"You're as twisted as ever."

"If you twist far enough, you end up facing straight forward again, Shinjou-kun. But anyway, were you able to hand over the gift you brought?"

"Yes." Shinjou smiled. "The director gave me so much last time, so I bought our school cafeteria's famous Kinugasa Gelatin. It's amazing. It has 0% fruit juice, but it apparently still tastes like fruit."

"Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, your ignorant naïveté is lovely and right in my strike zone. But…it is disappointing that the item I prepared in the cafeteria did not catch your eye."

"Yes, yes. …Wait. Is that why there was 'Shinjou Konjac Gelatin' in the cafeteria gift corner!?"

"All the fiber is gentle on the stomach."

"You aren't backing down, are you? Are you? You instantly decided not to back down and moved about three steps ahead, didn't you?"

"Calm down, Shinjou-kun. I know it is a disappointment that I was only able to prepare the Se-chan flavor in time. But do not fear. I secretly drew myself on the underside, so we are inseparable. No matter what happens, you are still mine and mine alone."

"But that means we have our backs to each other."

"How careless of me! But the way our backs are pressed together is unbearably delicious!"

He isn't going fix this even if I warn him, realized Shinjou. *In fact, I feel like he's actually pulling me in.*

So she instead flipped through the documents again.

Among the letters sent here, one had been brought from Top-Gear by Sayama's grandfather. It of course said nothing about Top-Gear or concepts, but it mentioned that she had begun to manage a church of her own.

...The funding was given by someone calling themselves "The Pair's Daddy-Long-Legs".

The letter said Shinjou Yukio did not know who that was but that she was thankful.

Given the name, I wonder if it was that world's version of Sayama-kun's grandfather, speculated Shinjou. *No, if it was, it would Mommy-Long-Legs or Granny-Long-Legs.*

"I wonder what happened."

"What happened with what?"

Sayama casually urged her on, so she gave voice to her thoughts.

"I must have been on Noah with my mom, but why was that? My parents weren't getting along."

"And yet you were born. Is that a problem?"

She did not nod because even she was doubtful whether it was a problem or not.

"What if I was an unwanted child?"

She turned around and saw Sayama accepting her words with his usual expressionless look, so she spoke with the new letter in hand.

"My mom had people who were cheering her on, but she didn't get along with my dad because she did not want to actively help them. She had allies, so why was I born between her and the man she was trying to keep her distance from?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. But…I do wonder why."

The letter in her hand eloquently described a moment in the past. It was from the time in which her mother had had trouble with her father.

"I always refuse, but he keeps showing up. My hymns are gradually spreading through the local people, but he keeps his distance from all of them and watches me. And when I approach him, he only ever says he wants my help with his work."

Shinjou checked to make sure Sayama was reading the letter and let her shoulders droop.

"To be blunt, your father may have been something of a stalker."

"I was thinking about saying the same thing. …I bet the two of you would have gotten along well."

"What are you talking about? Stalking is a crime."

"Then what is it you're always doing?"

"If you and I are not in the center of the world together, the world could very well fall out of balance and receive irreparable damage."

Shinjou was speechless and she blushed a little.

"Y-you really like making up weird theories about the world, don't you?"

"Checking on the answer does not change that answer, Shinjou-kun. Now…how about we set the world in motion just a little?"

Sayama stood up and forcefully tugged on her hand.

She hesitated for a moment.

"Wh-where are we going? I haven't read all of the documents yet."

"Not to worry. Right now, we must go to the place Shinjou Yukio, your mother, stood."

He looked through the cafeteria's glass door and outside.

There was a gate at the park's exit, an asphalt road filled with the darkness of night beyond the gate, and…

"The answer must lie in the wreckage of the collapse."

●

Sayama and Shinjou stepped out into the dark yard.

He was pulling Shinjou along, but she quickly moved up alongside him.

"We're going to see the past?"

"Some kind of impetus is needed to see the past. Baku uses that impetus to show it to us. That is how we will check to see if our reasoning about the past is accurate."

"You mean…"

Sayama nodded and continued for her.

"It is simple. We only need to find proof that your parents came to understand each other."

He turned toward her and held out his empty hand.

“Can you give me the letters you have already read?”

“S-sure.”

Sayama belatedly realized their breath appeared white in the cold air as they exchanged words.

The gas synthesized within Shinjou-kun is dissolving into the air, he realized.

“Shinjou-kun, may I stand downwind of you?”

“*Why*?”

He thought up an excuse. *This happened when we were exchanging drinks at the train station before,* he recalled. *I went with the direct truth then and that was a failure.*

In that case, I merely need to be less direct, he decided while smiling to lower her guard.

“Because your white breath smells sweetly of mint.”

“That sounds like a perverted comment in some schoolboy’s journal!!”

She shoved the letters toward his face and he tilted his head.

…Complaining about a compliment? She is so very shy.

Well, modesty is a very Japanese virtue, he thought. *And Kenjou, Japanese for modesty, sounds quite a lot like Shinjou.*

“Sayama-kun, are you going to read them or not?”

“I am,” he replied to her glaring eyes while walking toward the park’s exit.

He looked down to the text and found it had been sent to his father.

“Something good and something bad happened today. First the good thing: I can build a bell tower thanks to someone’s donation. Apparently, the director who actually runs the church knows who donated the money, but she won’t tell me who it is. She apparently signed a contract with the donor and she can’t tell me until the church is complete. But on her suggestion, I had a sign set up at the gate. The director named it the Nisho Church. I’m guessing she took the first character from ‘The Pair’s Daddy-Long-Legs’ and added on the last character of my name.”

The next letter described some conflict with her other self.

“Something bad happened again today. I ran into this world’s version of me. He says the funding for spreading the Bible is going to be redirected toward developing terminals for Noah.”

I see, thought Sayama.

Shinjou’s mother had defected to Top-Gear, but she had not promised her full cooperation.

She had worked to create a place for Low-Gear there, but before Shinjou’s birth, she had not helped with their concept creation and had been uncooperative.

She had likely wanted to stick to her role as advisor and allow Top-Gear to maintain its dignity.

At the same time, the higher ups of Top-Gear had not wanted her full cooperation. More than anything, they seemed to have wanted to show off that they had a defector from Low-Gear.

That may still have been a peaceful and relaxed time.

…But as an actual researcher, Top-Gear’s Shinjou Yukio had realized the difficulty and danger of concept creation.

That had led to conflict between them.

And Sayama imagined Low-Gear’s Shinjou Yukio must have made a decision after that conflict.

…She decided to take personal command of the concept creation and to give birth to Shinjou-kun.

What led her to do that? he wondered while nodding again.

Meanwhile, Shinjou produced an odd footstep next to him and asked a sudden question.

“Sayama-kun, why…why are you trying to learn about my parents?”

“You have doubts about your parents, so is it wrong to want to eliminate those doubts?”

He did not turn toward her as he asked that and she paused for three seconds before responding.

“It is. After all, you won’t look at me.”

“Is that so?”

He nodded and slowed his pace a bit.

The ground was solid below his feet and he sensed her to his side.

He showed her his expression by letting her stand by his side rather than by turning back toward her.

Even as she spoke, he thought that was a cowardly way to show her his emotions.

“Why did my father choose my mother?” he asked.

“…”

“As a result, I was protected by my mother and survived. There is nothing wrong with the result.”

He found it was difficult to speak without allowing his white breath to become a sigh.

“But I would appreciate it if that decision was made for a happy reason. My father realized he should choose my mother, but he likely did so because your parents chose each other.”

He took a breath.

“I want your parents to have chosen each other for a happy reason. That way, my father would have celebrated the decision and noticed my mother’s presence. He would have realized she was the only one he had.”

“Sorry.”

“Thank me instead, Shinjou-kun.”

“I-I don’t think that would get the right meaning across.”

“But I would prefer to have your thanks than your apology. The meaning does not matter as far as that is concerned.”

Sayama picked up his pace again.

He could see the gate ahead.

He pulled Shinjou’s hand in close, pulled her body in close, and placed an arm around her shoulders.

She spoke quietly as he helped keep the cold away.

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you.”

As they exchanged thanks, they approached the gate and walked through.

The streetlights briefly cut off their view, so it felt like stepping out into another world.

But that other world had an asphalt ground and a cliff.

“You can see so much.”

The night scenery opened up down below.

The nearby lights were from houses and cars driving along the roads. The more distant lights were from the port and the boats on the sea.

Shikoku, through which they had travelled that afternoon, was visible as a band of light past the bridge over the Naruto Strait.

“Your mother must have seen this scenery in both Low-Gear and Top-Gear.”

Sayama and Shinjou stopped in front of the gate remaining before the cliff.

Sayama then breathed in and faced Shinjou.

“Now, time for some questions.”

“Eh? W-wait. Where did this come from?”

Shinjou frowned in confusion, but Sayama ignored it.

He raised three fingers in front of her.

“You must answer three questions. If you do not…”

“I-I have to strip?”

“…That is a great idea, Shinjou-kun!!”

“Oh, no! Why did I have to say that!? Forget I said anything!!”

She quickly tried to flee, but he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back.

“Now, for question one.”

“W-wait a second! I haven’t pressed my mental start button yet!”

He waited a little, so she slowly turned around and tilted her head worriedly.

“Y-you won’t really make me…right?”

He immediately nodded with a smile.

“Unfortunately, that is incorrect. The correct answer was ‘Artluman’s seventh special attack is the eye jab’, Shinjou-kun.”

“What kind of question has an answer like that!?”

He ignored her and held out his hand as if asking for her to give him something.

She forced a smile and jabbed a finger into his palm.

“What’s this hand for? Money?”

“Of course not. This is for something which has a value that cannot be bought, Shinjou-kun.”

She sighed and resignedly removed her tie.

“Fine, fine. Make do with this.”

As suggested, he made do. Namely, he wrapped it around his forehead.

“Now, time for question two, Shinjou-kun.”

“Y-you’re still doing this!?”

“Unfortunately, that is incorrect. The correct answer was ‘Kamen Vader 1 died by-…”

“O-oh! Oh! He held a nuclear bomb in his arms, bungee jumped off Tokyo Tower, and destroyed Tokyo!”

“I am really not sure what he was hoping to accomplish with that. …But how did 2 die?”

“Ah, that’s a cheap question!!”

“The answer was ‘he collided with 1 after performing a Super Headbutt to catch him from below’.”

As he spoke, Sayama removed another piece of clothing from Shinjou.

“Eh?”

After about seven seconds, Shinjou looked down.

“Um…”

She frantically held down the front and back of her skirt and crouched down. She was also blushing.

“S-Sayama-kun!? Wh-what was that for all of a sudden!?”

“These are not the panties you wore this morning, Shinjou-kun. …Strings? Were you expecting something to happen!?”

“No, I’ve changed clothes since this morning and I thought these would be easier to walk in. …More importantly, give them back!”

“Restrain that which has at long last found freedom? I could never do something so cruel! I must protect this.”

“Protect? Come to think of it, I’d noticed some of my underwear was vanishing from the closet.”

“Yes. To make sure they would not be stolen and to ensure I would have some on hand whenever you needed them, I placed them under my strict supervision.”

“So it was you!!”

“W-wait, Shinjou-kun! You misunderstand! I am pure!”

“Yes, it was a misunderstanding to ever think you were innocent. You’re obviously pure here. Pure guilty!”

This makes for a nice daily life too, thought Sayama as he received a moderate strangling. But just as he began to give in to the asphyxiation, he restrained himself and quickly tapped Shinjou’s hand.

“C-calm down, Shinjou-kun. And at any rate, it is time for the third and final question.”

Shinjou stopped moving with her arms still reaching toward his neck.

She must have assumed saying anything would lead to further clothing being removed because she remained silent.

So Sayama exhaled and opened his mouth for the final question.

“Question 3: In the Kinugasa Library, we saw Miss Shinjou Yukio standing in the snow. The building next to her had a concert hall and bell tower. In other words, that was the completed version of her church. The gate likely had a sign calling it the Nisho Church. But…”

He looked over to where the cherry tree had to have been.

“She spun around in front of that completed building. So why did she do that? Why did she spin around and spread her arms as if to show off the completed building?”

He asked his question.

“Who was she showing it off to?”

●

Shinjou raised her eyebrows at Sayama’s question.

…Come to think of it…

That dream of the past had only lasted a moment, so it had looked like the woman was dancing.

But that was unlikely to be the case. Below that snow-covered cherry tree, she had turned toward someone.

After looking into Osaka’s sky where Noah floated in the darkness, she had turned toward someone behind her with a look of joy over the completed church.

“Was that…my dad?”

“What do you think?”

She heard the toe of Sayama’s shoe tap hard against the ground.

“He must have been standing here, below the gate. Most likely without an umbrella.”

“Without an umbrella?”

“Your mother did not have one either. Don’t you think your mother had a childish side to her in that way?”

Shinjou thought about the mother she had no memory of.

“You’re right.”

When her mother had turned around, the look in her eyes had been confident that someone was there watching her.

Shinjou looked to her mother who had once turned around here in another world. She directly returned the woman’s gaze.

“I had a thought, too.”

“And what was that?”

“Well, whenever my mom was faced with something painful or unpleasant, she would hide it behind a weak smile,” she explained. “So why did she write about my dad in her letters? She said she had trouble with him and did not like him without trying to hide it.”

“That is a new fact I had not noticed. And on that snowy day…”

She knew what Sayama was saying, so she nodded and continued for him.

“She must have been announcing to my dad that the church was finished. She would have said something more sacred than Noah had been built. …And she would have said they might be able to create the Biblical mythology in that world.”

Shinjou spoke her thoughts while fully aware it was only a convenient hope.

“My mom may have been trying to put Top-Gear and Low-Gear on the same level by giving Top-Gear the Biblical mythology they lacked. Instead of creating concepts and waging war, she wanted to provide each world what they lacked as well as something they could believe in. …And so she pretended to defect.”

Sayama said nothing, so she breathed in.

She touched the metal gate and looked into the distance where she pictured her mother’s gaze in midair.

“My mom must have turned my dad away. She would have told him they would be just fine without Noah and she must have asked him to stop inviting her in and to instead listen to *her* invitation.”

She took a breath.

“That wasn’t mentioned in the letters, but I’m sure of it. She had to have given him an invitation, too. If not, he wouldn’t have continued coming here.”

She hesitated, but she decided to say it.

She gave the identity of the individual who her mother had wondered about, the one who had donated to have the church built.

“If not, he wouldn’t have secretly funded the construction of the church.”

She breathed out and told herself not to cry. She willed the tears back because she had not reached the conclusion yet.

But next to her, Sayama placed an arm around her shoulders and asked a question.

“Why do you think Top-Gear’s Shinjou Yukio was ‘The Pair’s Daddy-Long-Legs’?”

“It’s simple. The name Nisho Church partially came from that alias.” She gave a powerful nod at her own words. “And if you place the characters for ‘Pair’ on top of each other, they become the final character in Top-Gear Yukio’s name.”

Shinjou looked up toward that space in an alternate world where a gate with that name would have existed.

“When the church was finished, my mom would have heard the truth from the director. There’s no, no, no way the director would have been able to just watch on after seeing her turn my dad away.”

I would have done the same, thought Shinjou as her voice rose to a shout.

“My mom chased after him when he silently left without looking back, didn’t she!?”

Her question roused Baku on Sayama’s head.

He gave her the answer to her question about the past.

●

A snowy slope was a poor place to run, but she ran.

It was night, but the snow filled the air with pale light and Low-Gear’s Shinjou Yukio ran down the slope in a lab coat.

Snow got in her shoes and chilled her feet as it melted.

But she still ran. The snow snatched at her feet, but she kept herself from slipping by continuing ever onward.

“Wait!”

Her white breath and her voice did not reach him.

The back of a lab coat walked away through the snow and did not turn around.

“Wait up!”

She breathed in, felt the cold air stabbing at the back of her throat, and stumbled through the snow.

Her slow pace frustrated her and she could tell she was not catching up.

She wondered if it was curiosity or interest driving her to reach him.

“Wait.”

The lab coat up head did not wait, so she pushed herself even faster.

“Ah!”

Her foot got caught in one of his footprints and she tripped.

Instead of falling to her knees, she fully collapsed to the left.

She was lucky the snow had accumulated as much as it had. The asphalt did not scrape at her skin and she actually scraped away the snow. She sat up to knock away the snow that had been pushed up onto her.

She sighed while sitting in the snow and she finally realized she was sweating.

…Why?

Why was she so desperate? She did not know.

“Wait.”

With that word, tears spilled from her eyes for some reason.

She sobbed and her shoulders rose and fell.

“Wait…”

She muttered the word and brought her hands to her eyes like a child.

She saw a tall figure in a white lab coat standing before her.

He was there.

His sharp eyes looked directly at her and seemed to pierce right through her.

“…!!”

She blushed and quickly stood, but she slipped on the snow she had packed down and she almost fell backwards.

Swinging her arms was not enough to keep her balance, and…

“——————”

She did not fall.

She noticed he had grabbed her right hand. And with almost painful strength.

…*He saved me.*

She wanted to say something and wondered if she should thank him.

But as soon as he let go, she used her left hand to slap him.

The high-pitched sound filled the air, the snow accumulated on his shoulders scattered away, and she shouted.

“What is the meaning of this!?”

She planted her feet on the ground and slapped him again. The sound of the second strike permeated the snow.

“Why…Why would you do something like that?”

He returned her gaze and relaxed his shoulders.

“What would ‘that’ be?”

She felt her body temperature rising at that question and she swung her left arm to point up the slope.

“You don’t know what you did!? You funded the construction of that church!”

She breathed in and formed words at the volume of a yell.

“Were you taking pity on me!? Or were you trying to bribe me!? Did someone order you to do it? What were you trying to do!? And…what were you thinking!?”

With her firm expression intact and unexpected tears in the corners of her eyes, she forced a laugh.

She wiped away the tears with her sleeve and took a shrill breath, but forced a smile with her eyebrows raised.

“That must have been amusing! You got to watch a silly woman go on and on about how proud of the church she was without realizing you had paid for it all! She had been manipulated by you the entire time, but she ignorantly acted like someone important!”

After that, she lowered the ends of her eyebrows, and asked the true question she had saved until after the unnecessary complaints.

“Why!? Why would you do that after we tried so much to distance ourselves from each other!?”

That shouted question produced a reaction in the man.

He looked up a bit toward the heavens.

At the top of the slope was a church and past that was Noah.

He stared in the distance beyond the snowy darkness.

“It wasn’t some impressive reason.”

“Just tell me!”

At her urging, he closed his eyes, breathed in, and spoke with an exasperated tone.

“I simply wanted you to succeed.”

“For me to!?”

His eyes were closed, so he did not see her expression.

He only lowered his head and continued.

“No matter what, I have to create concepts and prepare this world to fight. And eventually, Top-Gear will be unable to trust visitors from the other world like you. Once the enemy could arrive at any moment, the world will begin to think fortifying our defenses is the best way to spread peace.”

He did not stop there.

“But most likely, you are right, Shinjou Yukio. No matter what happens, you will still be right, Shinjou Yukio. You did not choose Top-Gear or Low-Gear. You made the right decision and chose to be a bridge between all Gears. You chose something I could not and you are undoubtedly right.”

He then said “but” and “so”.

“I wanted to see just how much your way of thinking could change the world. I wanted to see how much the true feelings of my other self could change the world.”

"…"

"Listen," he said. "The donations I made to you might as well have been made to me. Your pride in the completed church gave me joy. I got to see just how much my other self could accomplish."

He opened his eyes and looked to her.

For the first time, he narrowed his eyes with a small smile on his lips.

"That is why I funded the church, my other self. I chose to remain a man of this world, so you outdid me. From now on, I will be able to see the light of your church from Noah. I will also hear its bell. And that will be proof that there is at least one thing in this world that someone wished for. That will be one thing I truly managed to create for this world."

With that, he turned around and bent his back a little.

"Farewell."

The man in a lab coat took a step away into the falling snow.

As soon as he did, she did not hesitate.

"Wait!"

She wrapped her arms around him from behind.

She embraced the lab coat to stop him from continuing down the slope.

She knew she could not force him.

…This man…

He had already restrained himself for the good of this world, so he would not give into force.

She would need a will that surpassed his if she was to stop him.

So she shouted loud enough for her voice to pass through his back.

"Please tell me!"

She breathed in.

"Someday, god will reside in this place! You built the very first place for god's voice to be heard in this land! No lies are permitted there and anything you confess will be forgiven. So…so please tell me. What do you want from me!?"

And…

"You understand, don't you? Someone on your level has to know the data I gave you was modified and you have to know why…why I won't create concepts in this Gear!"

"I do know. You are another version of me, after all."

He slowly chose his words.

"I understand why you are making it so we cannot create concepts."

She nodded at his answer.

"You understand, but you can't do what I'm doing?"

"The higher ups would never accept that Top-Gear is inferior to Low-Gear in any way. That is why I have chosen my path and left you to do things your way. I have now settled things with you, so you can continue doing things as you please. And…"

She felt him sigh.

"Are you going to waste everything I have given you?"

"We still don't know if I can waste it."

To erase his trembling sigh, she pressed her own breath into his back.

"Are you afraid of your own words? Are you afraid of the words that will ruin everything I have?"

Tears spilled out as she exhaled.

"Tell me. Please tell me, my other self. I have always chosen to give instead of receive, but if I am truly wanted in this world, then tell me what that means."

He slowly took a breath. He breathed in instead of out.

The oxygen was cooled by the snow, so it pricked at his lungs as he spoke.

"I want you to help me settle everything for this world…no, for all worlds."

She listened to his trembling voice.

These were the words of her other self.

"I truly have no interest in bringing an end to conflict or in what is right or wrong. I simply want all Gears to care for the world."

After all…

"If every Gear is righteous, then no Gear has erred. The destruction was not brought on by people's mistakes. I want to say that the destruction came about because they were right."

So…

“Please help me, Shinjou Yukio. Help me make sure this world does not err in the righteousness it so desires. I want your knowledge, your skills, and your songs. That way the light and sound you have created and all else that was born of true righteousness will never vanish from the remaining world.”

“Is that…what you wanted?”

“Yes,” he said. “When I first learned about Low-Gear as a child, I thought about your presence there. And when I saw you playing the organ in that church, I wished for your happiness. I remember the very first words you spoke from the pulpit: Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

He asked a question.

“Answer me, my other self. Was I wrong? If so, I will apologize for funding what you have made.”

She did not answer, but she did let go of him and circled around in front of him.

In the snow, the two of them slowly moved in close.

“——————”

The bell rang. The brand-new bell rang.

The ringing permeated the snow as it carried into the distance.

Chapter 23

“Notification of Continuation”

Your world is turning
You are turning your world
Your world is embracing you

●

Light footsteps traveled down a night road covered in winter dew.

They moved at a jog.

The figure passing below the streetlights was a girl wearing a flight jacket over her school uniform.

She wore a large rucksack on her back.

The name “Heo” was stitched into the flight jacket and her light body moved with a light step.

Her breath was white, but there was no disturbance in her swaying body and blonde hair.

“How is it? Is my fatigue good enough?”

She looked back at the plant creature sticking its head out of the rucksack.

The creature expelled more white air than she did.

“Delicious. H Heo is delicious.”

“I don’t really like how that sounds.”

If she sped up, she could feed the creature more heat, but…

…Once I get home, it’s over.

Feeding this plant creature is surprisingly difficult, she thought. *Is heading out on a walk with no real destination the best way?*

After that, she wondered if Harakawa was back home.

Did he know what his mother had told her or what she had learned from Sayama and Kazami?

…It’s hard to say.

Her knowledge of the past was incomplete, but she still had a few thoughts.

…I want to head out and protect everyone.

This was not because she had an opposite or because it was her duty. There was something she wanted to protect, so she would do so. If anyone was working towards that end, she would help them and fill any gaps they might have.

At the very least, her parents had done that.

Instead of leaving Top-Gear to be destroyed and escaping, they had done the best they could inside that destruction.

As a result, Top-Gear had been destroyed and Kansai had suffered an earthquake, but Low-Gear had survived.

So, thought Heo.

…I will do the same.

She wanted to know everything. She wanted to know the truth, what had happened, and what had not happened.

If she did not know what her parents had done, she doubted she would be able to do the same and be proud of it.

“After all…I’m here because of them.”

If a great number of options lay ahead, she wanted to follow the example that had left her here.

No matter what happened, she wanted to choose what was most important to her.

She suddenly found herself running. Her body had responded to the answer her thoughts desired.

Her breath was white, but…

“Heo.”

“…? Yes, what is it?”

“Time to go home.”

“Yes, we’re on our way. Would you like to take the long way back?”

But…

“No.”

“Eh?”

The plant creature said “time to go home” again and suddenly moved within the rucksack.

She frantically stopped and found they were already in front of the apartment.

She quickly brought the rucksack in front of her and found the creature was stuck with only its head sticking out.

It clearly wanted to get out and she finally realized what it meant.

“You want to go back to the 4th-Gear reservation?”

“Already going home, so go home.”

At the same time, her cellphone rang. It was from Kazami who was staying inside UCAT.

“Heo! Did you finish the renegotiation!?”

“Eh? Well, um, I’m not sure.”

“The plant creatures in the beast bath are all leaving. …So what kind of negotiation was it? Since it’s you, did it have to do with tentacles!?”

“What kind of person do you think I am?”

The plant creature directed its thought voice toward the phone.

“Heo is H. Negotiation in the hospital. Makes H with Harakawa.”

“Eh?” Heo was briefly left speechless, but then she quickly spoke up. “K-Kazami! Just to be clear, I think you’re making an 8000 meter misunderstanding here!”

“Eh? Oh, right. Ha ha. Sorry, Heo. Something just came up, so I have to go.”

“I-is that something ‘telling other people so you can make fun of me’!?”

“No, no. It’s nowhere near that kind. Don’t worry. Don’t worry. Okay?”

“That doesn’t sound remotely convincing! Stop moving things along without listening to me!”

The next thing she knew, the call had ended.

She sighed while holding the plant creature’s bag and shrugged.

“What am I supposed to do about this?”

She faced forward and trudged toward the room.

There was a gravel parking space in front of the steel door.

…Harakawa’s motorcycle still isn’t there.

She walked across the dry gravel and spoke to the creature.

“Harakawa isn’t here, so should we head back to UCAT?”

It had said it was time to “go home” and she was certain Kazami and the others were making all sorts of jokes about her.

That would surely be more fun than sitting alone in the apartment.

She turned her back on the apartment while realizing she was doing this more for her own sake than for the plant creature. As she did, she saw her shadow on the gravel.

“Eh?”

She realized a light had to be on for her to cast a shadow.

The gravel crunched below her feet as she turned around and saw a light on above the steel door.

However, the frosted glass to the side of the door showed the room was dark.

…Did I forget to turn it off when leaving this morning? Or…

With hope filling her chest, she unlocked the door and peered inside the room.

It was dark.

A silent stillness filled it, but Harakawa’s shoes were not sitting in the entranceway.

“…”

So did I really forget to turn off the light? she wondered while stepping inside.

She turned on the entranceway light, removed her shoes, decided to eat dinner at UCAT, and turned toward the kitchen.

She saw something odd there.

A pot sat on the kitchen stove. It was filled with water.

A plate sat in the kitchen. It contained chopped vegetables covered in plastic wrap.

A meal could be completed just by adding curry powder or some other seasoning and then cooking it.

Who had prepared that and why?

She thought back to that morning. She was fairly certain she had cleaned everything up then.

…And I think we had just run out of curry powder.

At that point, a breath escaped her lips. It was a sigh of relief.

“…”

Her shoulders relaxed and tears welled up in her eyes before falling.

“Idiot…”

She wiped her eyes with her jacket’s sleeve.

“You can’t just win me over with food.”

She forced a bitter smile.

“I guess I got back before him. Oh, I know. How about I cook up the vegetables and then see how shocked he is when he comes back with the curry powder?”

She gave a triumphant snort and started in from the entranceway.

As she did, she noticed a black leather wallet on the shoe rack.

“That’s Harakawa’s.”

It was thick and likely contained every last yen he owned.

…He went shopping without it?

Was he lost in thought? she wondered.

…Is he having trouble?

At that point, she frantically shook her head.

“Th-that isn’t my problem.”

Besides, she did not even know if he had actually gone shopping.

“I-I don’t have to worry about him. Not after he abandoned me.”

If he really was having trouble, he would call her and tell her to bring his wallet.

…But he doesn’t know I’m back.

Also, she doubted he would actually call her asking for help.

After two nods of understanding, she realized something.

“N-no, wait! He abandoned me!”

But, she thought.

…He always tried to protect me.

She breathed out. She did so thrice. *Not yet,* she told herself as she made it to five times. *A little longer,* she added on her way up to seven.

That was enough to relax her body and allow her to move more naturally.

She reached for the wallet on the shoe rack.

It had a weight to it. It was important to him and she felt it was not something she should have, but she knew a supermarket that was open this late and he knew about it too.

When they would go shopping together at night, she remembered getting excited and buying excess food.

Two things worried her.

“We won’t just miss each other if I leave now, will we?”

And…

“He won’t turn me away if I go to meet him, will he?”

That comment received a response.

“Don’t worry.”

It came from the rucksack she held to her chest.

The plant creature rose up and hopped down from the loosened opening of the bag.

“Go, Heo. That is best. Don’t worry.”

Because…

“Heo and Harakawa should be together. Together, so can’t be not together.”

Once it landed, the creature sat down.

…It’s telling me to go?

“Want to see you two join together.”

Am I reading too much into it if that sounds dirty? wondered Heo as she shrugged and smiled.

She then nodded, put the wallet in her jacket pocket, and gently stretched her knees to either side.

After gathering her breath, she took five seconds to settle her mind and let it show on her face.

“Understood. If I show you that even two very different people can be together, will it settle the renegotiation with 4th-Gear?”

The creature nodded and she realized anew why it had said it was time to go home.

…It’s over.

She did not know what she had taught the creature in their short time together, but 4th-Gear must have made up its mind and decided there was nothing more worth learning.

That was why it was time to go home. There was nothing more to check on.

…They’re no longer worried.

And so she decided to go in order to eliminate her own worries.

She would go meet Harakawa, return with him, and try to find something she could do with the laptop she had borrowed.

“I’m going.”

She turned around and opened the door.

It was dark out and her white breath scattered into the cold air.

But the night dew had yet to stain the gravel illuminated by the lights.

…That means whatever was there hasn’t been gone long.

She realized she could catch up with him, so she began to run.

She took off into the chilly darkness.

●

A pair of white breaths warmed the chilly air on the way down a slope.

They came from Sayama and Shinjou.

The two of them hurried down a slope located between a concrete hill and lit houses.

A thin line of sand followed Shinjou's shadow along the ground.

"Train" "Time" "Time to spare" "Only have to jog" "God of war" "Run?" "Ended on 'n' " "Over" "Over already" "Utter failure" "Stupid moron" "Curses" "You fool" "Loach" "Halibut" "Trout"

"Their shiritori just took a fishy turn, didn't it?"

While watching the Messenger of Wanambi's game of shiritori, Shinjou let out a white breath and looked to Sayama.

He had previously contacted Kazami and the others at UCAT as well as Heo who had been on her way home from the hospital.

He had been lost in thought ever since.

She knew why: his parents.

…Harakawa-kun and Heo's parents fought to make sure the world wasn't destroyed, but…

Sayama's father had said he had caused the initial destruction. The documents he had sent had activated the negative concepts.

In that case, Top-Gear had been destroyed by Sayama's father and, by connection, Low-Gear.

Responsibility for Top-Gear's destruction fell on Low-Gear.

During the day, Sayama had told Izumo Retsu that they would gather all of the Gears for a meeting.

Shinjou did not know what form that would take, but the past they had seen could be used as a weapon.

…And as a blade to make us aware of our own crimes.

He had to be thinking about what to do once everyone sat down together to speak.

As the negotiator, he would be making a gamble with the entire world on the line.

She wondered if he could manage, but then saw him doing something unexpected with a perfectly serious expression.

"Sayama-kun? Why are you holding my underwear up in front of you?"

Despite her question, he simply walked on while still staring at the underwear.

He had not reacted, but he did finally move.

"Don't put them on your head!!"

He gave a start and turned toward her in surprise.

"Wh-what is it, Shinjou-kun? Why are you interrupting my thoughts on the past?"

"How did that lead to staring at my underwear and trying to put them over your head?"

He looked at the underwear in his hand. He stared at them for a while before responding.

"This is not underwear, Shinjou-kun."

"What a revolutionary philosophy you have there."

"Yes. This must be a focusing tool that god has given me to help me concentrate. Logically, it must be an offering to the heavens, so the butt spirit must present it to the butt god thusly."

"You don't have to offer it to the heavens and neither spirits nor gods matter right now. Try to focus on reality! Even if we run across weird things from time to time, this is still the world of man!"

Sayama turned toward her and grabbed her shoulders with a calm expression.

"A living butt god has made an appearance!"

Once she chopped his wide-open sides with her hands, he twisted away from her.

"Sh-Shinjou-kun, a proper tsukkomi is done with a single hand into a single side."

"Enough of that," she insisted for the umpteenth time that day. "Are you prepared for the meeting?"

"I would like three days including today," he said readily. "I have my own thoughts, the memories of your parents, Heo's inspection of the world's creation, and the pasts of Harakawa and the others' parents. On top of that, Kazami, Izumo, the Hiba boy, and the others are sure to give me some ideas, a change of pace, and a sense of calm. Plus, Mikage-kun is still asleep. After three days of that, we will likely be able to settle quite a lot."

"Three days including today would mean…"

"The 23rd. That is cutting it close, but we can still make it," he said. "So once we return to Japanese UCAT, we can speak with the others and tell them we will be holding a meeting with every Gear and every UCAT. On the 23rd, Low-Gear can respond to the other Gears. …If we let that be known, Top-Gear will have no choice but to comply."

Shinjou thought on what he had said.

…But if he says it will be okay, it'll be okay.

He had specified that three days would be enough, so she gave a trusting smile.

"I'll be rooting for you and helping you, so let's do everything we can until then." She tilted her head. "But what part of this do you think we can use?"

“All of it, Shinjou-kun. If we question every single part, a path forward will present itself. But that path may be closed further along, so I would like time to check on it.”

He crossed his arms and Baku emulated the action from his head.

“For example, the answers to a few questions are still teasingly eluding us. Your mother mentioned three things only Low-Gear has, but we only have the temporary answer of ‘Shinjou-kun’ for the third one.”

He raised his left hand to his chin.

“Also, I have a question about something we saw your parents say earlier. Your mother told your father that someone on his level would know the data she had given him was modified and he would know why she would not create concepts in that Gear.”

Shinjou remembered that her father had answered that he did know those things.

“Does that mean my mom had no intention of creating concepts in Top-Gear?”

“But why not? The simplest answer is that her defection was a ruse and she had used them to her own ends,” said Sayama. “But in that case, why did she decide to work with Top-Gear on that snowy night? That would give Top-Gear the advantage.”

Shinjou realized he was right. Something did not add up.

Had her mother tried to keep the worlds in balance or had she tried to ensure one or the other would survive? Her mother’s intentions were up to one’s interpretation and Hajji’s group insisted on the latter.

However, Shinjou currently felt her mother had been the kind of person to choose the former.

…But we’re missing the piece we need to support that interpretation of their conversation.

She guessed the two of them had had an implicit understanding of that missing piece and had therefore not had to speak it aloud.

“That would be the reason why my mom handed over modified data and refused to create concepts in Top-Gear.”

“Perhaps the final thing that only Low-Gear has is related to that mystery.”

“Maybe,” agreed Shinjou before sensing her feet slow.

…But is it really?

Deciding whether to pursue that mystery or not was Sayama’s job as he looked at the big picture.

He also had the issue of his parents. He would want to prioritize learning why his father had made the decision he had.

But as he crossed his arms as if holding all the questions, he spoke.

“Well, I have a few guesses. I should be able to narrow it down if I have three days to think it over.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

This was about her parents. In the three days before the meeting, she would likely have time to read the letters and documents she had received today. She could tell him anything they told her and think on it herself.

But other than that…

“I’ll do anything to help you with that.”

“Is that so?”

He gave a serious nod, so she immediately cut in.

“Wait.”

“That is a new reaction, Shinjou-kun.”

“I had a feeling you were going to do or say something awful in seven seconds’ time.”

“What are you talking about? All I want you to do is strip.”

She watched as the idiot stopped walking and spread his arms in her direction.

“Our temporary answer to the third thing this Gear has is ‘Shinjou-kun’, so it is only natural to thoroughly investigate you for any information on the actual answer.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am. It is necessary for our investigation of the past.”

“I see…”

There’s no fighting this, is there? she thought while placing a hand on her heated cheek.

“Then what would you do if I stripped right here and told you to go ahead?”

“I cannot know for sure until it happens, but I would most likely be incredibly turned on.”

“You just ruined this!!”

“Wait!”

He swung an arm and pointed the palm toward her. The elbow of his suit snapped as he did so.

“Shinjou-kun, what comes next is what matters! Reason can overcome that filthy base desire! Have you never heard of self-control great enough to defeat arousal?”

“You certainly don’t have that.”

“Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, how can you say that when I have never shown it to you?”

“I’m saying it *because* you’ve never shown it to me!”

She shouted back and sensed something like a presence.

…Eh?

A chilly wind blew in from below.

It blew against the winter air descending from the sky.

That disturbance in the air was caused by someone climbing the slope.

…Who is it?

She and Sayama turned around and saw someone there.

In the depths of the darkness, the streetlights seemed to form steps of lit pavement and someone climbed them with a white dog.

“Toda Mikoku?”

Shinjou sounded doubtful because the girl seemed somehow different from before.

She was different from their meeting in Kurashiki or their meeting at Izumo UCAT.

…She seems somehow…calmer.

She realized the girl currently carried no weapon.

She only had the large white dog, but her gait was more certain than before.

What did she have?

Shinjou saw that Mikoku’s right hand was held against the center of her chest and her neck.

…Her eyes…

Instead of simply looking up, the girl was looking right at Shinjou.

With a cold look in her eyes, she stopped at five meters away.

“I am Top-Gear’s…provisional representative, I suppose. I am Toda Mikoku.”

●

Sayama heard her speak in the darkness of the night.

“I am here to present our demands to Low-Gear’s representative. This concerns 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core.”

Sayama frowned at the mention of 3rd’s Core.

Wondering what she meant, he crossed his arms and glanced over at Shinjou’s worried look.

“What is this about? So you have demands related to the 3rd-Gear Concept Core stolen by Nagata Tatsumi?”

“Yes.” Mikoku nodded and opened her mouth to continue. “First, 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core was acquired by one of ours in a personal battle, so we would like to return it to 3rd-Gear.”

By calling it a “personal battle”, she prevented Tatsumi and Hiba’s fight from being Top-Gear and Low-Gear’s fight. She intended to keep it a purely personal affair between those two individuals.

…That means the stolen Concept Core was not a hostile act against 3rd-Gear. She wants to say it was only an accident.

But why? he wondered. *How is returning the Core to 3rd related to their demands?*

She opened her mouth as if to answer his silent question.

“Top-Gear would like for Low-Gear to prepare a venue and opportunity to return it. And we also demand that venue have another use.”

Sayama listened as she took a breath and continued.

“We would like to gather every Gear in a meeting so we can hold a trial against Low-Gear.”

“…!?”

A meeting like that was exactly what Sayama wanted.

…So Top-Gear had the same idea.

But a moment later, Mikoku’s calm voice gave a dangerous demand.

“The meeting shall begin tomorrow.”

●

Mikoku saw Sayama frown and Shinjou shrink back.

She understood why they would react that way.

…I just made two unreasonable demands.

One was the meeting and the other was how soon it would begin.

But both of those things were necessary.

So to negotiate, she opened her mouth again and spoke as if those demands were only natural.

“Yes, a meeting,” she said. “The world is on the verge of destruction, so we would like to hold a meeting to determine how to settle this.”

That was the path to the ultimate conclusion in her heart.

When Hajji and the others had attacked and been defeated a month and a half earlier, their fight as the Army had come to an end.

Hajji and the others had showed no sign they wanted to be rescued from captivity. That was because they trusted the others, but also…

…Do they not want to weigh us down?

She did not understand, but that was why it was her job to give it meaning.

And so she had a thought.

…At the very least, the battle of resentment should have ended then.

Victory won with unilateral force would leave behind a grudge.

She had learned that from her encounter with Gyes and the other automatons.

So what she wanted first and foremost was a place to speak.

She also knew why the meeting had to begin so soon.

“It will take place tomorrow. I am sure 3rd-Gear would like their Concept Core returned as soon as possible.”

She had a simple reason for rushing this.

…I do not want to give Low-Gear time to think.

She was up against her other self who was a clever person. Given time, he would build up a logical attack formation and defenses of sophistry.

That would make it difficult to win even with a legitimate argument.

…Based on the records I have seen, this Sayama has formidable negotiation skills.

She gave a mental sigh of exasperation toward her other self.

How could he be so different from her?

He would have acquired a lot of information here in Sakai and that would help him build up his arguments.

So even if she had to force it, she had to rush the beginning of the meeting.

“Every world will want to see us settle this, so why not hold a meeting when 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core is returned?”

Sayama stood before her with his arms crossed.

She could tell he was thinking. Her proposed time for the meeting was too early, so he would be trying to find a way out of it.

After a while, he looked up.

“I have no objection to holding a meeting, but…”

But?

“But can’t you return 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core without our help?”

She nodded.

…Can I pull this off?

She thought she might just be able to control the discussion here.

She might just be able to have the meeting and have it held tomorrow.

She began speaking again towards that end.

“Listen. Returning the Concept Core without your help would be difficult.”

“Why is that?”

“A portion of 3rd-Gear holds a hostile view of us. In fact, I was attacked by 3rd-Gear automatons and fatally wounded this very afternoon. However, I chose not to fight back and left. I did so because Top-Gear wishes for a peaceful resolution.”

Mikoku held a hand to her chest and stared into Sayama’s expressionless face.

“We wish to return the Core peacefully, but 3rd-Gear may not allow that. So we need an intermediary. We need a venue where a great number of people can observe us and guarantee our safety.”

And…

“Once that is arranged, we can hold a meeting. Either way, only a few days remain until this world is destroyed, so wouldn’t it be best to settle things sooner rather than later?”

“It seems too soon to me.”

“For who?”

She made sure to keep any emotion from her face.

“For the past month and a half, the other Gears have been continually discussing this in their reservations. They will want to reconfirm the conclusion of the Leviathan Road. And we are prepared as well.”

“So if this meeting is delayed, you are placing the blame on Low-Gear?”

“Yes.” She faced Sayama whose eyebrows were slightly raised. “Does Low-Gear have any intention of keeping pace with the other Gears?”

She watched as he placed a hand on his chin and thought for a bit.

However, he soon faced her again and slowly pulled a cellphone from his pocket.

“Let me check on something. It would be wrong to decide this on our own, so I will contact 3rd-Gear’s representative.”

●

Night came early to Izumo UCAT.

Miyako was the master of the underground area and she would fall fast asleep after taking a bath and receiving a gravity vibration massage from the automatons.

For dinner, she had eaten the sea bream chazuke they had not managed to serve Shinjou and Sayama and she had taken a long, lukewarm bath.

Wearing a gown and surrounded by automatons, she lay in her bed, but she was speaking on the phone with a magazine in one hand.

“What is it, Sayama? Did you forget something? Like common sense?”

She teased him, but he only said “no”.

She frowned at how he actually sounded like he was thinking about something for once.

“Sorry about the sudden call, Miyako-kun. To get right to the point, would you prefer to have the Concept Core back in three days’ time or tomorrow?”

“What?”

She tilted her head and realized he had gotten himself into some kind of trouble again.

But she still said “what a pain” loud enough for him to hear.

“Of course tomorrow would be better. I’ll take the 24-hour delivery. If it’s late, I’m only paying half price.”

“Is the Concept Core no different from a pizza?”

“Then how about you throw in a drink for free, Sayama’s Pizza? And I’m not sure what’s going on here,” she said. “But you’re planning something, aren’t you? Then I’ll leave it up to you. I’m sure only you can pull off whatever it is.”

He fell silent at that, but finally spoke clearly.

“I see. Understood. Then to fulfill your request, I will arrange everything for tomorrow.”

“Sure,” she said. “Don’t do anything too crazy.”

She hung up there.

She handed the phone to an automaton and someone stepped out of the darkness.

It was Gyes. Her eyebrows were lowered in worry as she approached the bed.

“Lady Miyako, I bought the new dessert from the ‘Shops with a Long Line’ series as you requested.”

“Yeah, that series is pretty good. So what is it?”

“What?”

Gyes tilted her head and Miyako smiled bitterly.

“You don’t look very happy. Is it about that phone call?”

“Yes, sir.”

Gyes handed the convenience store bag to another automaton.

“Did our battle with Top-Gear’s Toda Mikoku have anything to do with this talk of returning our Concept Core?”

“Are you asking if the attack on Toda was a mistake?”

When Gyes nodded, Miyako’s bitter smile grew and she waved a hand dismissively.

“It wasn’t. It really, really, really wasn’t. If it had been, that idiot would’ve mentioned it on the phone. Since he didn’t say anything, it wasn’t a problem and he can manage.”

She lay face down and the surrounding automatons spread their arms and approached.

On Moira 1st’s instructions, they placed their hands on different parts of her body and she looked to Gyes.

Gyes still looked worried, so Miyako smiled.

“Basically, worrying is wasted effort. I just say whatever’s convenient for me and Sayama just has to think of a way to- hyo hyo hyo!! Nwoh! That really…hee hee hyah!”

“Lady Miyako…”

Miyako began writhing around with Moira 1st and the other automatons partially holding her down, but Gyes relaxed her shoulders and sighed.

“It is true that boy and his friends can’t do anything normally.” Gyes sounded annoyed. “So they’re sure to do this in some crazy way too.”

●

“To sum up, 3rd would like the Core returned as quickly as possible and with a complimentary drink.”

Shinjou saw Sayama put away his phone and heard him speak.

Mikoku tried to pet the dog, but it lightly bit her hand instead. The girl then faced them.

“I did not expect the drink, but I am glad to know exactly what 3rd wants. …So what will you do?”

Sayama nodded and spoke to Mikoku.

“It is true that holding a meeting then would be the most efficient option.”

He was stating his understanding of her demand.

…Don’t tell me he’s going to agree to have the meeting tomorrow!

Shinjou turned toward him in surprise.

“Sayama-kun!? Um…”

But his expressionless face looked straight ahead.

He did not look away from Mikoku.

“Do not worry, Shinjou-kun. It is a decent justification for a meeting.”

His words reached her chilly ears.

“And there is nothing to worry about it. Nothing at all. The only reason to reject having the meeting tomorrow is our own self-preservation. And it is not a problem to me if I agree to hold the meeting then.”

He turned toward Shinjou with a sharp look in his otherwise expressionless eyes.

He then asked for her confirmation.

“I will do something about this and I would like your help.”

That was all.

That was all he said.

But it was not the chill of his words that made her tremble.

“…”

It was the request for her help.

He trusted her.

And she replied while aware the ends of her eyebrows were slightly lowered.

“Of course.”

This is dangerous, she thought.

He had originally said he needed another three days.

But Mikoku had requested tomorrow and he had agreed.

She was nervous about quite a bit, but she accepted that anxiety in her own agreement.

…He said this is fine.

So she chose not to doubt him.

She decided to do what she could.

With that decided, she turned back to Mikoku.

The girl stood with the city’s nightscape at the bottom of the hill behind her.

“…”

Shinjou saw her shoulders lower in relief. A worrisome burden had been lifted from them.

Shinjou realized that girl was standing on the edge as well.

They were interacting on the border between their different standpoints.

It was their knowledge of that which had led Sayama to agree and Mikoku to sigh.

Next, Mikoku gave Shinjou a different kind of look. Her sharp look softened and she let out a white breath.

“You have my thanks.”

“And you have ours. I’m impressed you managed to choose a bloodless meeting.”

“I see.”

Shinjou saw a small smile on Mikoku’s lips.

Afterwards, Mikoku looked down at the dog beside her.

After about three breaths, she seemed to make up her mind about something and asked a question without looking away from the dog.

“I apologize, but may I ask a personal question?”

“What is it?” asked Shinjou.

After some more hesitation, Mikoku opened her mouth.

“Is this dog’s owner okay?”

Shinjou turned toward Sayama.

She was silently asking him if they should tell her and his gaze told her to go ahead.

She nodded, breathed in, and made up her mind as she looked at the side of Mikoku’s face.

“She’s just fine. She’s living somewhere away from both UCAT and the Army.”

“I see,” said Mikoku.

After a while, she repeated the two words.

“I see. Is it a place free of fighting?”

Sayama was the one to answer that.

“If you do not think of everyday life as a kind of battle, then it is.”

“Is she happy there?”

“That is up to her.”

“I see.”

Mikoku nodded, stood back up, gently tapped the dog’s back, and suddenly turned around.

“We will settle this tomorrow. If you make the place known, it will reach us. I am counting on you.”

She let out a white breath.

“And if possible, can you make one personal promise?”

“What might that be?”

“I am sure it will be many years after this is over, but if Shino ever marries someone, can you send her some flowers for me?”

“You can do that yourself. And…you are surprisingly sentimental.”

“I know,” she replied before beginning to move.

She and the dog walked down the slope and toward the nighttime city. They picked up their pace and seemed to dissolve into the darkness.

“Sentimentality, memories, and Top-Gear’s feelings…”

The wind carried Mikoku’s voice to Shinjou’s ears.

“…will all bring her happiness.”

Chapter 24

“Greeting to the World”

Good morning
Let us stuff the world in a trash bag
And prepare to carry it to the curb

●

Morning filled the air.

The winter morning was so early that the sun had yet to rise and the eastern sky had only just started to grow bright.

Frost covered everything and the temperature was low enough to form ice.

The only sound was the distant engine of a newspaper delivery motorcycle.

However, someone was walking through that early morning.

The streetlights illuminated a girl in a kimono and jacket as she walked along a residential sidewalk.

It was Shino.

She awkwardly shook as she used her crutch and her black hair swayed back and forth.

She was traveling southeast which would take her to the main road.

Her white breath was directed downwards and she released a larger breath every few steps.

"…"

After breathing out, she raised her drooping shoulders and began walking again.

She held the cracked blue stone and the red cloisonné stone that hung from her neck.

"I have to go."

Words escaped her downturned lips and entered the cold air.

"I have to go…or it'll mess everything up."

But she immediately shook her hair side to side.

No, she told herself while stepping forward.

…I'm the one that's messed up.

"They're all so nice, they don't care about my past, and I can stay in this world, but…but…"

She let out a white breath.

"Why does it hurt so much?"

She breathed out yet another white breath.

"I have to go. I don't know where to, but I have to get away from here."

Because…

"Not long ago, I thought I had to fight. Why…Why can I throw away those feelings so easily?"

She fell silent there and only opened her mouth to breathe as she walked.

But she suddenly looked back.

She stared into the darkness beyond the countless streetlights.

The rows of dark houses hid the one she had come from.

"I'm sorry."

She thought about the sister and brother with the same surname as her.

"I was happy there."

She looked away and faced forward again with her head hanging low.

With her back turned, she used her crutch to move forward again.

She was still not sure exactly where she was going, but she made sure she left that place.

●

Each day of Taka-Akita Academy's year-end festival began at daybreak and ended at daybreak.

It was not exactly an official event. The students had started it on their own, so the students spent late nights both preparing and celebrating. They ended up forming rotations and transforming the school into a sleepless place.

The sky was still dark on this clear winter morning.

Each day of the festival would begin at that time, but more as a lazy market than a celebration.

The stands would show each other what they had set up and continue the preparations that had begun before dawn. Meanwhile some few people and motorcycles would pass by.

Someone walked along while listening to those sounds and voices.

It was Kazami in her school uniform walking from the large bicycle parking area behind the band of school buildings.

She carried a backpack and rushed along the gravel path to one of the buildings.

On the way, a few club or committee representatives sleepily called out to her.

"You're not with your husband?"

"Kaku had somewhere to go, so I came by bike and he'll be here later."

“What are you two doing for the costume dance party tonight? Are you doing the French Revolution like last year?”

“That was just once and we only did it because I wanted to throw cake around. This year, I’ll probably be walking around with a spear or something.”

She continued on while accepting the reports from the more well-prepared representatives.

Her destination was the second year school building.

She entered through the north entrance, passed by the stairs, and entered the hall on the right.

She found someone standing there.

“Siegfried-san. Taking inventory this early in the morning? You put in a lot of work.”

He smiled bitterly and looked at the books piled up to the hallway ceiling.

“Yes, but I never thought you would be using my workplace as a meeting room.”

“You can blame that idiot Sayama for that one. …And thanks.”

“I hear you have been working hard, too. Or at least you were before Sayama and Shinjou got back.”

“Yes. Sayama called and asked me to take care of a lot until he could get here. But it seems he has a lot to think about and started going over a lot of information with Shinjou as soon as he did get back.”

Kazami scratched her head and looked at the piles of books in the hallway.

“That’s a lot of books. Do you need some help?”

I hope he doesn’t actually ask me to help, she thought as Siegfried turned toward her.

He looked at her, brought the fingers of his right hand to his forehead, and thought for a bit.

Eventually, he looked like he had found the right words.

“Listen. It is crucial that books are handled with extreme care.”

“That’s a roundabout way of saying no, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said while crossing his arms.

She lowered her shoulders and walked past him, but she turned back after placing a hand on the library door.

“Is everyone here? More or less anyway?”

“I do not think you can have ‘more or less’ of everyone.”

“It’s a Japanese way of speaking. …But from that, I take it they’re more or less all here.”

She smiled a little and opened the door.

The instant she stepped inside that open space, she heard several overlapped voices.

- ――――――

The concept texts harmonized and formed a mere sound more than words. It had a clear, metallic ring to it.

And a moment later, something appeared before her eyes.

“Wow, now this is an absurd class meeting!”

The school’s unneeded desks and chairs filled the library to create a meeting room and those seats were mostly filled.

“Two representatives from each Gear plus an audience composed of representatives from each UCAT and assistant representatives from each Gear.”

Some were human, some were half-dragons, some wore lab coats, some were automatons, some wore military uniforms, some wore armored uniforms, some wore kimonos, some were made of plants, and some were made of stone. There was even mist, air, light, and darkness.

“Meeting!”

A voice came from the backpack Kazami wore and a plant creature poked its head out.

The creature had been sent by Mukiti as one of 4th-Gear’s representatives.

Kazami had transported it because the other representative would be brought by Heo as it had been renegotiating with her.

Kazami lowered the bag and the plant creature hopped out.

It more skipped than ran across the stepped floor.

Its destination was lined with the same desks and chairs seen in a normal classroom.

Even the scribbles and carved writing and drawings were still there.

The Kinugasa Library was a large room that took up as much space as four classrooms. By cramming in as many desks and chairs as they could, they had secured over two hundred seats.

Almost all of them were filled by humans, the almost human, and the nowhere near human.

The humans were in the minority here and…

…There’s almost no one from Japanese UCAT.

Sayama, Shinjou, Heo, and the others would be in the nearby classroom they were using as a waiting room. A concept space had been set up so each Gear and UCAT had their own waiting room in the one classroom.

…How is this going to turn out?

Kazami waved at the plant creature as it turned back toward her.

“Thanks,” it said.

She smiled and then looked around again.

This was the site of the giant “class meeting” to which every Gear was invited.

A lot of “people” were here and she noticed something behind the desks and chairs.

A blackboard had been placed on the wall next to the preparation room entrance and the meeting program was written on it.

1: Opening Greeting
2: Moderator Enters
3: Question-and-Answer Sessions with Each Gear and Top-Gear vs. Low-Gear Debate
4: Trial and Vote for Low-Gear
5: Announcement of Vote Results
6: Closing Greeting

During the meeting, Top-Gear would return 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core to Japanese UCAT and everyone would know it had been returned to 3rd via UCAT.

Officially, 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core was the main purpose of the meeting.

“Officially, anyway.”

As the program suggested, it was actually a question-and-answer session and a debate between Low and Top.

And Sayama had claimed Parts 4 and 5 were the biggest problem.

For Part 3, he would argue with the other Gear representatives as Low-Gear’s representative, but once the question-and-answer sessions with each Gear, including Top-Gear, were over, the trial and vote of Part 4 would begin.

They would vote on a single issue: would they forgive Low-Gear or give themselves over to Top-Gear?

There were twelve Gears and two representatives from each, but apparently…

…*Jord alone will represent 10th-Gear.*

It seemed the 10th-Gear residents had a deeply-rooted policy of distancing themselves from the world and opinions among their own people were split into two groups. So instead of working with UCAT, they had announced Jord would represent them and that they were abandoning their other spot among the representatives.

They had even stated that they would accept any negative consequences of that decision.

…*Do they feel somewhat responsible because they had at least known Top-Gear existed?*

But in doing so, they had lowered the total number of Gear representatives to twenty-three.

Once they voted, a majority outcome was unavoidable.

…*How is this going to turn out?*

Thanks to the rematches and renegotiations, she felt several of the Gears had been drawn back to Low-Gear’s side, but what was going to happen now?

And…

“How will it all turn out?”

She breathed in, gathered some strength, and asked the empty air.

“Can we win this?”

●

Shino walked with her shadow by her side.

The sky was dimly-lit and the clock above her said it was 5:30 AM.

She was in a large park and the park’s lights illuminated the rows and thickets of trees from below.

The sign at the entrance said Akigawa Central Park, it truly was located at the center of the city, and it was due east of the Tamiya house.

If she cut southeast through the park and followed the main road on the other side, she would reach Higashi-Akiru station on the JR Itsukaichi Line.

If she made it there…

…*I can go somewhere.*

Shino rested on her crutch and let out a white breath.

She wiped the sweat from her brow and faced forward.

She currently stood partway up a manmade hill and she was taking the stairs up the grassy slope.

Once she crossed the hill, the main road was directly ahead.

From her position, she could only see a bench at the top of the hill. Beyond that was the dimly-lit sky.

…I need to hurry on to the station.

She had decided to go to the Hachioji area.

She could no longer return to her home there, but she felt somewhere she knew would be best.

If it went well, she could pick up the luggage hidden in a number of locations. And once she found somewhere to live, she wanted to return these clothes to the Tamiya family.

To get there, she either had to travel to JR Haijima Station and switch to the Hachiko Line or travel to JR Tachikawa Station and take the Chuo Line to Hachioji.

…I need to hurry.

Five-thirty in the morning was when the Tamiya house's night shift was replaced by the morning shift.

Kouji and the others would be preparing breakfast.

…They've already noticed, haven't they?

She wanted to put more distance between them before they had a chance to act.

Then she heard a sound.

It was a train's whistle and the rhythmical shaking of the track below the train.

Shino gasped and began climbing the slope.

She would be able to see the train's lights, so the station's location would be obvious.

Her legs trembled as they relied on the crutch, but she recalled what the Tamiya family's doctor had said.

…It's only psychological now.

The doctor had said she feared something and was afraid to stand on her own two legs.

Kouji had said she could wait until she was no longer afraid and Ryouko had cheerfully said it was only a matter of time.

They're such good people, she told herself as she reached the top of the hill.

"——————"

There, she saw the dark city and the rest of the scenery below the park's hill.

The train's lights were travelling east through the field on the other side of the road.

"Ah," she said without thinking.

The road running alongside the tracks was straight and supported a residential area near the station.

If she crossed the field, she only had to follow the road to reach Higashi-Akiru Station.

If she chose a road without any traffic lights and the narrowest of the residential area's roads, she would reach the station without any trouble.

"Thank goodness."

She breathed a sigh of relief, but suddenly turned around.

She let out a white breath as she looked back. She looked west, the way she had come, and she saw something familiar there.

To the west of the central park was another field and the municipal office was two hundred meters away.

But another hundred meters beyond that was…

"The Tamiya house."

The neighboring houses had yet to wake, but one house was filled with light.

It was three hundred meters away, so it was not far at all for anyone who could run.

"You're kidding…"

She had walked so much, hesitated so much, and tried to get as far as away as possible, but the lights of the house were so close that she felt they were watching her.

"——————"

She let out another white breath and her legs gave out.

She sat in the bench at the top of the hill and dropped the crutch to the side.

"What…?"

She took a breath.

"What am I doing?"

●

The morning air filled a classroom.

The plate hanging on the classroom door said Waiting Room for the Leviathan Road Meeting.

A blonde girl sat by the window on the far end of the room.

It was Heo.

She faced a laptop as the heater started to warm the morning classroom.

This was not her first time at this school, but it was her first time sitting in one of the seats like this.

She looked at Harakawa, Hiba, and Shinjou who wore her armored uniform as they sat at the desks and worked.

…They can sit in these tall chairs just fine.

She sighed and looked to the scenery outside the second-story window on her left. The window frame had apparently been destroyed at some point and she assumed that damage was just part of everyday life here. Meanwhile, she got back to working on the laptop.

She was testing the theory of the twelve Gears' creation.

According to Hajji, the mother element, which had formed the ten Gears and been destroyed, had used the power of evolution and regeneration to create a single giant positive Gear aka Top-Gear. Top-Gear's creation had formed Low-Gear as a negative counterpart.

He claimed that made Low-Gear a fake created as the negative side of Top-Gear.

…But…

Heo manipulated the Gear creation pattern diagram that Kashima had created. She could specify the time axis and a few conditions and she could alter the relative locations before running a simulation of how the Gears had been created.

She had been doing this since the night before and she had a single reason for doing so.

…I need to see if all of the Gears could have been created in a way other than what Hajji said.

But it was not going well.

Whenever she shifted or removed any of the conditions, the world was no longer created and it all just fell apart.

Since the night before, she had destroyed the world again and again while also infinitely multiplying it.

Just as she would think it was going well, the world would continue to exist instead of breaking.

And…

…That isn't all.

She had another job: translating reports.

The Gear representatives, UCAT representatives, and audience members of the meeting all needed a report on what Team Leviathan had learned.

They were providing the report in English because it was an internationally understood language.

However, Shinjou was in charge of writing the report and she did not know English.

The only members of Team Leviathan who could speak English were Sayama, Harakawa, Kazami, and Heo.

That had automatically made it Heo, Harakawa, and Kazami's job to create the translated report.

Harakawa was currently sitting at another desk translating Shinjou's report into English.

Heo thought she should help, but Harakawa refused to give her anything to do. He said she needed to focus on finding an answer to the Gears' creation.

And then the door opened and Kazami stepped in.

"Harakawa, I'm here to take over for you."

"The meeting's beginning soon, so I'll finish it off."

Kazami shrugged and looked to Shinjou. Shinjou was typing and instructing Hiba where to copy some photographs into the report. Each time she did, Hiba would run off to comply.

But now Shinjou responded to Kazami's gaze.

"I think I'll have the whole thing done by the midpoint of the meeting. I plan to send the different parts out in the order they'll be read."

"Is that so?"

Kazami put her hands on her hips and turned to Heo.

"How are you doing, Heo?"

Heo let her shoulders droop.

"Well…"

"Don't worry about it," said Harakawa while still facing his own laptop. "There isn't an answer for you to find if he was right, so don't despair even if you don't find one. That just means he was right after all."

"But what if I overlooked something?"

"We're the ones that let you handle this, so it would be wrong of us to complain. All we can do is decide you came to the best answer possible or help you until you find the answer."

He pulled a book toward him. It was Kinugasa Tenkyou's mythology encyclopedia.

That was when Shinjou looked up.

"Did I get something wrong?"

“I’m going to make the quote more persuasive by pulling out the original book. It makes a better bluff than just writing a citation and the people watching can be more easily convinced that a lie is correct.”

“That sounds like something Sayama-kun would say.”

“That is *not* someone I want to be compared to.”

Harakawa clicked his tongue and typed in the romanized version of the author’s name given with the publication data.

It was true the name of Kinugasa Tenkyou would be highly persuasive to the Gear and UCAT representatives.

…Everyone’s working so hard.

So she nodded and decided to do her very best to find an answer.

Instead of wasting time worrying, she needed to move toward that answer.

But the problem was…

“I have to attend the meeting as 5th-Gear’s representative, don’t I?”

Hearing that, Kazami brought a hand to her chin.

“Can’t you head out for 5th-Gear’s question-and-answer session and then come back in here? You can have Harakawa sit out there in your place for the rest of the time.”

“Why me?”

“You’ll help Heo, won’t you? And you can bring Shinjou’s report with you and translate it out there. Once you’re done, send the data back to us.”

Kazami then pointed to the seat Heo was sitting in.

“And way to go, Heo. That’s Harakawa’s seat, isn’t it?”

“Eh!? B-but I just used the seat Shinjou led me to.”

She turned around and saw Shinjou’s shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

“I made sure you would sit there.”

Harakawa sighed when he heard her.

“I was wondering who had arranged that. So the criminal was one of our own.”

“U-um, Harakawa? Sh-should I move?”

“You can if you don’t like sitting there. Personally, I’m about to leave on a journey to heal my heartbreak over this betrayal.”

“Ehh!?”

Just as Heo cried out in protest, two things happened.

One was the door opening and a large boy in a school uniform entering. It was Izumo.

“Hey, things are about to begin.”

The other was someone suddenly standing up from behind the teacher’s desk.

“It would seem everyone but Mikage-kun has arrived.”

It was Sayama in a suit.

Heo then saw Sayama turn toward Shinjou.

“Sayama-kun, a-are you okay?” asked Shinjou hesitantly.

Heo knew why. The meeting preparations, checking over the report, and everything else they were doing were on his instructions.

…Earlier, he said he was getting some rest and went to sleep.

He had been working his mind and body since the night before and could not have gotten even a half hour of sleep, but he stood tall before them.

He had his usual expressionless look, his mouth hung slightly opened, and he raised his left hand.

He then pointed at a location a bit below the ceiling.

“At this moment…”

He spoke while staring into the empty air.

“I see three Shinjou-kuns flying around. One in her pajamas, one in her underwear, and one in the nude.”

“G-go back to sleep!!” shouted Shinjou.

“Ha ha ha,” laughed Sayama as he turned her way. “Shinjou-kun. Is that Shinjou-kun in the armored uniform the real one?”

“Y-yes? And what would a ‘fake’ one be?”

“Heh heh heh. A fake one does not have a winnable route. …Anyway, are you worried about my condition right now?”

“Yes. …I am.”

“Is that so?”

He nodded, gently spread his arms, and spoke casually.

“If you give me a voluntary kiss, I should wake up. Yes, and I will surely achieve victory in this meeting.”

Hearing that, Heo realized something.

…If he's still acting like this, he must be okay.

●

The meeting room was filled with as many movements as there were people and the noise gradually grew.

The seats were split into four sections using the four sides of the stepped floor.

The seats by the counter were for the representatives of the twelve Gears. The long rows of seats on the north and south were for the audience.

The seats by the preparation room in the back were for the audience members with higher priority and a teacher's desk was set up on the highest point of the floor for the moderator.

A single desk was prepared in the center of the lowest portion of the floor. That was Sayama's seat.

Most of the seats except for the moderator's and Sayama's were filled.

Various voices came from those seats and automatons moved between them carrying drinks and the like.

The drinks were melon soda and teas that Kazami and the others had secretly acquired from the year-end festival. For snacks, they had okonomiyaki and chocolate bananas. The representatives from other countries or Gears were busy learning about the cuisine of a foreign nation or world.

But as they provided that service, the automatons used their shared memory to search for hidden weapons and to estimate the guests' physical abilities based on their heat-resistance distribution.

"This is #56. The guest in Seat 3B6 has three knives in their pocket."

"Testament. This is #81. Based on their physical condition, I believe the guest in Seat 2D13 has a hangover."

Also, the voices they heard from the various seats contained important information.

"…depends on the Suez tariff and if we can get the trademark." "Oh, Lady Miyako, they were selling a tenderloin cutlet flavor of chocolate cigarette." "In other words, our intentions on the continent are to…" "Roger, Roger. What is this 'Blue Hawaii' flavor!?" "No, I don't bet on soccer." "Delicious." "Field." "Oh, if only I could make a video of this scene and show it to them." "…depends on whether we can get the rights for…" "Can't they hurry it up? I have work back at the department."

They are all different, concluded the automatons while processing the many voices they could hear.

However, they soon realized something: one spot within the great crowd of seats remained silent.

It was the spot that had gathered the most attention earlier.

It was the lowest and southernmost end of the counter-side seats for Gear representatives.

That was where the Top-Gear and 9th-Gear representatives sat.

First was the seat for Hajji as 9th-Gear's representative. He and Jord had been escorted in as soon as the library had been opened up.

After a while, an old man in a work uniform who could only be a Low-Gear human had sat next to Hajji as 9th-Gear's substitute representative. Not long later, Toda Mikoku had arrived with her hands filled with grilled squid and takoyaki. She was accompanied by a white dog and Nagata Tatsumi and their appearance had sent a quiet stir running through the others.

Tatsumi was still in the process of consuming some cooked chicken liver.

Next to her, Mikoku pet the white dog's head as it sat by her. Jord had scooted her seat over to allow Mikoku to sit next to and speak with Hajji.

Mikoku and Hajji's exchange was clearly just an everyday conversation. And…

"I have determined there is information missing," commented one automaton. "They are omitting something of which they have a tacit understanding."

Based on what information was missing, they seemed to be talking about someone they knew or…

"Is she not with you? Hm?"

"No." Mikoku adjusted her position in the seat and nodded. "She is apparently somewhere where she can live a happy life if she wants."

And…

"I think she is fine. Both she and I…are not alone."

The automaton felt Mikoku was assuming too much, but Hajji only crossed his arms.

"I see," he muttered.

The automaton did not know why Hajji had displayed an understanding of Mikoku's assumptions.

Regardless, Mikoku smiled bitterly and Hajji seemed to have a question about it.

"What is so funny? Hm?"

"Oh… Just that your response was the same as mine when I heard."

Hajji eventually smiled bitterly as well.

The two of them finally laughed quietly and gathered more attention.

However, Hajji looked around and returned the people's gazes.

"This is wonderful," he said.

He reached an arm around Mikoku's shoulders as she crouched over in laughter.

"This is wonderful, Mikoku. Yes, truly wonderful. If this all ends today, how about going out for yakiniku with your adoptive father? Hm?"

"Is that any way to ask out a teenage girl?"

"Hm. Then how about steak?"

Mikoku did not reply. She only leaned forward again while her back and shoulders shook.

But Hajji gently tapped her back.

"Let's eat a lot. Yes."

His words do not fit, thought the automaton.

"Why is he talking about food when she is crying?"

I do not know, she thought, but she understood it was not a harmful act and that she had her own job to take care of.

Suddenly, the speaker installed in the library produced a noise.

Everyone turned toward the red-haired automaton standing at the seat next to the moderator's seat.

"Now then, everyone."

They all briefly spoke and moved, but all the movement and noise soon vanished and she continued.

"We will now begin the Leviathan Road meeting."

●

Roger heard #8's dignified announcement from his seat among the southern audience seats.

Everyone around him, including Odor, focused silently on #8 and waited for her next move.

The other automatons had stopped moving and seemed to be making some kind of decision about the situation.

...They must be wondering whether this meeting is wanted or not.

Not that they will find an answer until it is over, he silently added.

Suddenly, he heard two new sounds.

Someone had clapped twice in quick succession.

It had come from the opposite direction.

It was Hajji who sat on the lower level of the seats by the counter.

He calmly sat in his small chair and loudly clapped.

"What's wrong, everyone? We should celebrate this moment. The time has come to understand the true state of the world!"

Meanwhile, a gray-haired man in black spoke from the top level of audience seats by the preparation room.

"Yes, this may be the time to celebrate. Because we'll be putting an end to something not at all worth celebrating."

The two men stared at each other either with one eye or through sunglasses.

"—————"

And they audibly looked away.

Tension ran through the room, a palpable silence fell over everyone, and #8 spoke.

"Now, it is time for the moderator to enter."

Next, Roger saw the meeting's moderator stand up.

It was a gray-haired automaton waiting in one of the upper level northern audience seats.

"The moderator will be the Japanese UCAT automaton, Sf-sama."

"Tes."

Sf gave a shallow bow to everyone and turned her slightly narrowed gaze toward each location.

"I have determined the '-sama' is not necessary."

Almost immediately, several people raised their voice. Their shouts were filled with panic, anger, and restraint.

"Objection!!"

●

#8 heard several cries of objection.

It did not only come from the Gear representatives and the assistant representatives in the audience seats. It also came from the UCAT representatives.

The chain-reaction of voices grew louder.

…Is the meeting going to be delayed?

She knew why. Japanese UCAT was the one being accused in this meeting, so the other representatives were concerned that the moderator had been chosen from them.

Not only did the moderator move the agenda along, but she would accept or reject objections and everyone present was required to obey her decisions. So why did one of the accused hold that position?

…They can ask why if they want.

But their worries created a torrent of voices as they all tried to have their own voice heard.

#8 decided this was going nowhere and prepared to give the automatons an instruction.

She would tell them to stop everyone from speaking.

But just before she did, two sounds reached her.

They were very loud and they came from opposite directions: the air and below the floor.

The one in the air was metallic and the one below the floor was a rumbling. The two of them collided at floor level.

"!!"

The entire library shook up and down as if it had been struck.

All of the chairs and desks slid around a bit and the people sitting in them had to support themselves on each other.

It only lasted an instant, but that was exactly why it managed to stop them all from speaking and moving.

Once the shaking subsided, #8 saw the two men who had caused the loud noises.

The first was an elderly man raising his right hand in the center of the top row of northern audience seats.

He tilted his head in annoyance.

"Roger, Roger. Are meetings always this noisy?"

Roger answered the man while brushing a hand through his hair.

"No, Colonel Odor. They are holding a festival today, or a Matsuri as they call it. And during a Japanese Matsuri, a form of folk entertainment known as Ikki is customary. I believe this commotion is a usage of the Ikki mantra."

"Ikki? What is Ikki?"

"Testament. Ikki is when they all chug a bottle of sake and attack a public facility while demanding that the annual Nengu tax be lowered. I believe there has recently been a push to ban it during commercials."

"So…So it is a large-scale military civil lawsuit!? Is this country still stuck in the middle ages!? And…"

#8 watched as Odor turned to the south.

She followed his gaze and saw a black-haired man in black sitting with his arms lightly crossed.

She recognized him as Chinese UCAT's representative.

His left leg was sticking out into the aisle next to his desk and it was firmly planted on the stepped floor.

…Did he make that underground tremor?

"Interesting. A very interesting trick," said Odor. "Does your technique only work in the lowest of places?"

"In my country, we refer to the power in the earth as a 'crouching dragon', resident of the soaring eagle's land."

The man with a Chinese UCAT nametag turned to #8.

"Now, please tell us why you have chosen her."

It was not #8 that said "tes".

It was Sf herself and she already stood by the moderator's seat.

"It is a simple matter. I am a doll, so I have no emotions. If ordered to do so, I can make perfectly impartial judgments. …And Itaru-sama, what do you wish me to do?"

"Well," said the gray-haired man while crossing his arms behind his head. "I couldn't care less about Japanese UCAT, so judge everyone equally."

"Tes."

Sf nodded, fixed her hair, glanced at #8, and then looked across everyone else.

"If you are still worried, feel free to use any of the techniques you have. I am sure every Gear and UCAT has techniques of confirming that I truly have no emotions. I have determined you can keep me under constant observation if you like. But…"

She took a breath.

"If you make a false report saying I have displayed emotions, betrayed my master's request, and lost my impartiality…"

She raised both arms.

Everyone saw a heavy machinegun with anti-concept modifications in each arm.

The dully shining black metal already had ammunition belts loaded and the triggers were halfway pulled.

Sf's emotionless gaze raced back and forth and tension filled everyone it landed on.

Regardless, she spoke.

“It seems a moderator normally possesses a hammer for moving the meeting along, so I have prepared my own. I am powerless on my own, so I brought two of the loudest hammers I could find. If the hammer falls two thousand times a minute, it should quiet down even the most unruly participant.”

No one said anything more.

Faced with that still silence, Sf nodded toward #8, so #8 adjusted the position of her microphone and opened her mouth.

“Now, will the Gear representatives please rise?”

Below the lights, all of the Gear representatives stood.

Many of them were substitutes and many of them were not human, but they were all the representatives of a world and a history.

For 1st-Gear, it was long-lived Brunhild and her black cat.

For 2nd-Gear, it was Imperial Tsukuyomi Shizuru and Military God Kashima Akio.

For 3rd-Gear, it was Tsukuyomi Miyako, queen of 3rd, and Gyes, the automaton representative.

For 4th-Gear, it was a normal plant creature and a plant creature taking Mukiti’s place.

For 5th-Gear, it was Heo and Harakawa, who was standing in for Thunder Fellow.

For 6th-Gear, it was Boldman and Izumo, who Boldman had selected as a substitute representative.

For 7th-Gear, it was the four balls of the Concept Core and Hiba, who acted as their assistant.

For 8th-Gear, it was Wanambi’s PDA and a Messenger of Wanambi.

For 9th-Gear, it was Hajji and the old manager.

For 10th-Gear, it was Jord alone.

For Top-Gear, it was Toda Mikoku and Nagata Tatsumi.

And for Low-Gear, it was Kazami and…

“Ha ha ha. Sorry I am late, everyone!!”

A sudden voice stabbed into everyone from the door by the counter.

The all turned around to find a boy in a suit with Baku sitting on his shoulder.

He stopped as everyone focused on him. He calmly pulled a comb from his pocket and fixed his hair.

“I am Sayama Mikoto, Low-Gear representative as well as the negotiator to act as defendant and Low-Gear’s defense lawyer.”

He spun around once and struck a pose such that his clothes made a snapping sound.

“Are. You. Listening!?”

He struck a new pose with each word, placed Baku on his head, and spoke to the entire world.

“Now, let us begin! I am in an excellent mood! After all…”

He took a breath.

“Shinjou-kun just gave me a voluntary kiss on the lips!!”

Chapter 25

“Where to Carry One’s Being”

I want to take your hand
But my trembling soul
Still desires the bed

●

All but one of the library's lights was turned off.

That one was a reserve light in the center of the ceiling which illuminated a boy and a desk below.

The boy wore a suit and looked out at the people he could faintly see in the darkness.

Some wore suits, some wore traditional garb, some were old, some were young, some were male, some were female, and plenty were not even human.

But he understood that they were all watching him and that gave him a thought as he looked around at them all.

…I am being watched by every single world.

This had come quickly.

Just eight months earlier when the cherry trees had been blossoming, he had stared up into the sky from the emergency stairs, unsure what to do.

He had wanted to get serious and he had plunged into a place where he could do that.

…And now the world is focused on me!

He placed the weight of his excitement in the bottom of his heart to puff his chest out with pride.

And a moment later…

"——————"

He lowered his head.

He turned in each direction and bowed, slowly but surely.

Baku also bowed from atop his head.

After the four bows, he raised his head and looked at them all again.

Wonderful, he thought. *Simply wonderful.*

…Even as I take my eyes off them to bow, the world still watches me.

A laugh of joy almost escaped his throat.

His absolute delight seemed to twist into an audible sound deep in his gut.

Utterly wonderful, he thought. *Bless this wonderful world.*

Feeling generous, he decided introduce himself.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen of many worlds. I am Sayama Mikoto, the Low-Gear representative who stands at the center of the current world."

The world quieted down, but it was not mere silence. Tension filled the air.

The world did and said nothing as it waited cautiously to see what he would say next.

Good, he thought. *That is good. This is good. Nothing else would qualify as good.*

He felt the world needed to be peacefully tense.

They could not build peace on top of tension. They had to build tension on top of peace.

…You could call it high-tension peace.

The world is surprisingly focused on momentum, he thought as he used the tense atmosphere to speak.

"Approximately sixty years ago…"

Everyone focused on his words.

"Yes, sixty years ago, a vigorous war was fought even inside this Gear."

He put clear pauses between his sentences.

That kept people's focus from waning and felt generally pleasant.

"At the time, the monkeys we call ancestors realized the other Gears were continually fighting to ensure their own continued existence. That was known as the Concept War."

He took a breath and was happy to hear others taking similar breaths in the darkness.

"Our ancestors made a late entrance into that war, contacted each of the ten Gears, fought or negotiated with them, and ultimately played a role in their destruction. …And we also know that, fifty years later, they fought the sole remaining Gear, Top-Gear, destroyed it, and watched its ending arrive."

He breathed out, but his last sentence received no objections.

…Because that will be the greatest point of contention in this meeting.

He nodded to maintain a consensus with everyone else. At this meeting, Low-Gear had to go back over everything related to the post-Leviathan Road world and…

…Investigate the truth behind Top-Gear's destruction.

How that turned out would determine the result of the final trial. It would decide whether Low-Gear was right or not.

He gave a mental sigh turned his eyes and attention in all four directions and thought.

...Being judged is rather interesting.

Oh, but it is a shame.

...It is such a shame that Shinjou-kun is not by my side and that this will not last forever.

It was also a shame that he could not say aloud how interesting he found this.

The highest point in the world is surprisingly full of disappointment, he thought while placing his hands on the desk.

“Now, I would like to use this meeting to accept the truth behind the destruction of the different Gears and to go over the compensation your worlds require. But as Low-Gear’s representative...”

He breathed in.

“I would first like to express my deepest sympathy for all of those who were unable to make it here.”

With those words, he bowed deeply enough to place his forehead on the desk.

●

Some people gasped in response to Sayama’s action and others stirred.

“What a farce!”

Sayama kept his head lowered, but a young man in casual clothing cried out from the 6th-Gear section of the northern upper level audience seats. He stood up below the deactivated lights and pointed at Sayama.

“Your deepest sympathy? For all of those who were unable to make it here? That’s all because of what Low-Gear did! You’re just using nice-sounding words to justify your own actions!”

“Wait!”

This new shout came from a woman in the 2nd-Gear section of the southern audience seats.

“Then are you rejecting any sympathy for all of the people who didn’t make it here!?”

“Low-Gear has no right to give or receive sympathy!” he shouted. “The people of Low-Gear are the kind who grow defiant even as they bear their own seven deadly sins!”

At that point, a sudden gunshot sent the young man flying through the air.

“...!?”

Everyone turned to the moderator’s seat. Sf stood there with her left arm aiming a heavy machinegun toward the ceiling.

Then #8 spoke from the next seat over.

“The moderator only allows the current speaker to speak.”

Sf nodded and slowly looked around. Everyone watched her silently and cautiously.

“Tes. I fired without a warning this time, but next time I will fire even with a warning.”

“W-wait! Are you ruling this trial with fear!?”

Sf aimed the heavy machinegun toward the one who said that.

They let out a shriek, but Sf continued regardless.

“Do not worry. I am using non-lethal rounds.”

She pulled a single bullet from the ammunition belt and tossed it high into the air.

She immediately released the machinegun’s hammer, a gunshot filled the library, and the sound of an impact soon followed.

However, no sound came from the thrown and fired bullets when they collided in midair.

Everyone watched blankly as sparks silently scattered, so Sf spoke.

“Did you see that? The bullets have been engraved with the words ‘Silence, fool’.”

The library was entirely silent save for the metallic clunk of Sf setting down the heavy machinegun.

After that, she looked south which was to her right. The 2nd-Gear woman cowered back at the automaton’s gaze, but Sf only urged her to sit.

“It would seem many of you still do not understand, so let me repeat myself. As a German-made automaton, I have no emotions. As such, I cannot understand anything said or done based on them.”

No one dared speak or even breathe.

“In a negotiation between two parties, I may not understand them, but I do understand that emotions are influencing the negotiation. But when an unrelated third party says something I do not understand, I will physically quiet them down.”

She looked to the audience seats as she spoke.

“Itaru-sama, will that do?”

“Try summing it all up in a single sentence.”

Sf thought for a moment and then spoke to them all.

“Please avoid speaking amongst yourselves.”

Everyone in the darkness frantically nodded, so Sf looked down to the person whose head was still planted on the desk at the bottom of the Kinugasa Library.

“Low-Gear Representative Sayama-sama, please continue your statement.”

“Testament.”

Sayama straightened up, raised his arms to fix his sleeves, and brought his left hand to his collar to loosen his tie.

“Well, then. I certainly did not expect a simple bow to be so poorly received. But Sf-kun, you make a good protector of our speech. If I say anything silly, please shoot me as well.”

“That was already my intention. I am perfectly impartial. …I do hate the Soviets, though.”

The representative of Russian UCAT ducked down behind the others, but both Sf and Sayama ignored him.

Sayama then spoke while looking up at the audience around him.

“Listen, everyone. I have no intention of letting this end with mere sympathy and apology. If you wish for a fight, we can deal with that later. But first, how about we begin by doing what we can with words?”

He raised his eyebrows a bit and spread his arms.

“So I am perfectly prepared to bow down.”

He faced forward and everyone followed his gaze to the one sitting in front of him.

“1st-Gear Representative Brunhild-kun, we can start by hearing what you have to say.”

●

Despite being called on, Brunhild was having trouble grasping the meaning of this meeting.

1st-Gear had already clashed with Japanese UCAT several times. They had been forced to retreat each time and they had reached an understanding.

…And I’m sure the others know that.

But, she thought.

She did not ask why. She thought “but” instead.

She did not know their reason, but instead of asking why, she moved on to creating that reason for herself.

…But…

There was something she could point to because they all had an understanding.

So she faced forward where a desk was set up about a dozen meters away at the bottom of the Kinugasa Library.

She had a thought as she looked at the boy in a suit who stood beyond the desk.

…There’s a lot to hesitate over and a lot to question.

But the others had come here to give their answer, so she stood up.

The light above her switched on and she knew she was lit up just like Sayama.

…The world is focused on 1st-Gear right now.

Even during the Concept War, they had only been seen as one of the ten Gears that needed to be defeated.

I see. So this is the first time in history for 1st-Gear to receive this kind of focus, she thought with a bold smile in her heart. *In that case, this ridiculous stage isn’t so bad.*

At the same time, Sayama spoke.

“Do you have something to say, representative from the world of the dragon of words?”

●

The girl in black opened her mouth below the light.

This would be her first statement in this question-and-answer session with another Gear. And as the first statement in a meeting held with every Gear present, it deserved to be recorded. The stenographers from various Gears and UCATs prepared their paper or laptops and the stenographer automatons waiting behind the moderator’s seat also prepared.

They all accurately copied down Brunhild’s words.

“The question-and-answer sessions here are meant to discuss what to do in the new world, aren’t they? After all, we’ve already finished the Leviathan Road and settled the past.”

Her first statement was calm.

The audience’s tension would fade away with her next statement. If she had not said not said what she did, that is.

“In that case, I have a question concerning the coming new world.”

The stenographers immediately saw the girl swing her arm around to produce glowing writing in front of her.

It said, “When will we be able to leave the reservations and enter this world?”

She then clarified the question.

“If the non-human races are trapped in reservations, there can’t be a ‘new world’. …What do you have to say about that?”

With the light shining on her, she pointed to one corner of the darkness.

That was where 1st-Gear’s assistant representatives sat. One of them had lost his wings but still had the massive frame of a half-dragon.

“Listen. We have people as big as that, so things are going to get pretty cramped if we get many more of them. And even if this world gives us a larger reservation, we’re still trapped inside it.”

The girl gently tapped on her desk and everyone saw a paper in that hand which said “locker” on it.

“————!!”

As they all watched on, she pulled a long weapon from the desk drawer.

“Requiem Sense. The souls that reside in here persuaded our people to abandon 1st-Gear, but where are we supposed to go now? Will you actually have a place for us here?”

She spun the scythe in her right arm. The blade end of the handle rotated around her arm like a living creature clinging to her. It sliced through the air as it moved from her right arm to her shoulder, to her left arm, and to her left hand. With a snap of the wrist, she sped it up and sent it back the way it had come.

The air split open and she gently twisted her body as she sent the scythe back to her right arm.

Meanwhile, light began to appear around her.

The green light looked like luminescence or firefly light.

“The souls sleeping in the underworld are asking: have the lives they sent onward arrived in a new world? Or…”

“Or are they in another closed-off world like 1st-Gear? Is that what they are asking, Brunhild-kun?”

“Yes,” she replied while rotating the scythe in her right fingers and sharply jabbing the bottom against the floor.

A solid sound rang out, the scythe shook, and light spilled from the blade like raindrops.

“Now, Sayama, give us a clear answer. This question could easily be avoided by continually putting it off, but I want a clear answer. Will we and the others with non-human forms be able to live in this world?”

A voice replied to Brunhild.

The low scolding voice came from Siegfried at the library counter behind her.

“Please do not damage the floor like that, Nein.”

Brunhild frowned and looked at her feet.

The bottom of Requiem Sense had dug into the wooden floor and the black cat was glaring up at her next to it.

“See, Brunhild? That’s what happens when you try to show off.”

She silently lifted the scythe and dropped it on top of the cat.

“Ah! Wait! Not the device! Not the device, Brunhild! This is so immoral!!”

“Shut up and support this a bit. Like a proper cat.”

“That last part doesn’t even make sen- hee hee hee hee hee. Stop, I’m sensitive there!!”

All of the stenographers copied down everything the cat said while wondering, “How many hees was that?”

Brunhild then faced Sayama.

“Well? Are you going to answer the question?”

Sayama crossed his arms and opened his mouth.

As soon as the stenographers readied their hands, he spoke.

“To be blunt, how many times must I bow down to make up for it?”

●

Brunhild’s mind was unable to immediately react to Sayama’s words.

However, her body did react. It filled with energy, the cat shouted some more, the stenographers were given a lot more work, and she suddenly came to her senses.

“W-wait a second!”

“Y-yes, please wait, Brunhild! My heart isn’t ready for that kind of enthusiasm!”

The stenographers occasionally had trouble translating some of the more incomprehensible statements and had to quickly ask another representative’s stenographer for help, but Brunhild did not care. At most, she was glad to be helping foster some interaction between nations and worlds

“Sayama, this world has a certain saying, doesn’t it? ‘If sorry was enough, we wouldn’t need the police.’ ”

“If you are ready to say you are sorry, you should not commit the crime in the first place,” replied Sayama expressionlessly. “To be blunt, it is simply impossible to throw your brethren – or any of the other non-humans – out into this world. Even if you would be fine, the people of this world know nothing of the Concept War.”

“…”

“So what are we to do about that, Brunhild-kun?”

He now asked her a question.

I thought I was the one asking the questions here, she thought.

It was true the people of this world knew nothing of half-dragons, spirits, or even the former existence of other worlds. If some non-humans showed up now, they would only be seen as a spectacle.

That was why Sayama had said it was impossible.

…Why?

Brunhild immediately smiled bitterly at her own question.

…The time for “why” has already ended. That’s an outdated word for me.

Instead, she thought “but”. Sayama had said it was impossible.

…But then he asked me what to do about it.

That was why she said what she would do if it were her.

“Yes, it’s true that would be impossible now.”

But what were they to do?

“So I ask that you help us remake this world not conceptually but as a world. And you can do so by making philosopher’s stones for us.”

“Philosopher’s stones? You can remake this world with those?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “If they are philosopher’s stones made from a concept text saying ‘fits in’.”

Silence filled the library.

Some in the dark audience seats leaned forward. They were mostly the residents of Gears with non-humans and the German and European UCATs that had agreed to take in the 1st-Gear reservation.

Brunhild spoke at the center of their focus.

“The non-humans of each Gear will either wear those philosopher’s stones or have them embedded inside their bodies before heading out into the world. If they do that, the people of the world will not fear or avoid us.”

“But doesn’t that mean you are being protected by the stones? Won’t it mean you cannot live in this world without relying on them?”

Sayama had a small smile on his lips as he asked and he gave an exaggerated shrug.

“How is that any different from living in the concept space of the reservation? You will have trapped yourself inside the protective cage of the philosopher’s stones.”

“True, but the stones are necessary to get along with the people who will live alongside us.”

She looked at Sayama’s slight smile as she spoke.

He already knows the answer, doesn’t he? she realized anew.

She went on to give the decisive statement.

“But what about the next generation?” she asked. “When the next generation of children is born into a world they share with us, they will grow up in a world that includes non-humans and will not need the philosopher’s stones to accept it.”

So…

“So let me be clear: only our generation will be protected by the stones. By the time our next generation is born, the people of this world will also be of a new generation and they should all be people who see nothing strange about our presence. After all, we will have been there from the moment they were born.”

Brunhild held her left hand forward and a few lights floated above her palm.

“We are the generation that was given a push and told to walk through the gate. But we are outsiders, so will not find a place of rest. So…so we will choose to be the generation which builds the room containing a bed of peaceful rest for the next generation.”

“Then in a way, won’t 1st-Gear and the other non-humans be conquering this world? You will use a generation’s worth of familiarity to become residents of this world.”

“Yes,” said Brunhild. “Help us, Low-Gear. You don’t need to say you can’t and bow down. We do not want this world. …We want the next generation of this world.”

“But what reward do you get? Are you sacrificing yourselves for the next generation?”

Brunhild lifted the scythe in her right hand.

“I don’t know if we will have a reward or not. But if we do have one…”

She swung the weapon and reaped the light in the air.

“It will be the possibility of finding people who will accept us without the philosopher’s stones even in this generation. If we find that kind of acceptance even once, it will be all the reward we need.”

Sayama crossed his arms and thought for a few seconds.

“That is an interesting answer, if you ask me.” He gave a clear nod. “So UCAT will help you. If you work up the courage and remove your philosopher’s stone before someone you can trust, UCAT will do everything we can to assist that person.”

He raised one arm and looked through the surrounding darkness.

“I have a suggestion. If, after this meeting has ended, Low-Gear has been forgiven and allowed to exist, I would like to create a Non-Human Naturalization Promotion Committee within UCAT.”

“Non-human naturalization?”

“That is exactly what you suggested, Brunhild-kun.”

He smiled and spoke toward the ceiling.

“This concerns every Gear. The committee will assist any non-human who wishes to live inside Low-Gear. And I appoint…”

He took a breath.

“…1st-Gear to lead the committee!”

●

Brunhild heard what Sayama said.

…You idiot.

She gave a resigned shrug.

He had made the decision on his own and assumed they would go along with it.

But, she thought. *But if we can do that…*

…What would the others think after helping all of us escape from the closed world of 1st-Gear?

Would they be delighted? Would they be rewarded for trying to accomplish something even as they were looked down on as a weak Gear?

But that might be too naïve, Brunhild warned herself.

That pessimistic thought caused her to speak.

“I doubt that would work out.”

She sighed and smiled bitterly.

“Yes, I seriously doubt any unguarded interaction with non-humans would work out.”

“Really?”

She almost said “really”, but a voice that could be taken as an affirmation or denial reached her.

“But didn’t it work just fine for a group in 1st-Gear long ago?”

Sayama’s calm words were answered by a sound.

It was the sound of chirping from Brunhild’s black three-cornered hat.

Looking like she had only just remembered, she removed the hat and let the small bird jump from her head and onto the brim of the hat.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked down at the bird and Sayama’s words reached her.

“You can find crazy people just about anywhere. Sixty years ago, a dozen or so such people gathered together and now…”

He looked around and Brunhild did the same.

They looked to each of the figures visible in the dark audience seats.

“Look, all of the people gathered here and the many more they represent are just as crazy. So what does that mean for the world domination of acceptance that you have bet an entire generation on? I would say it is only a matter of time before the entire world has gone crazy.”

Brunhild wanted some time before answering.

She slowly breathed in, created a few seconds of silence, and finally looked to the scythe in her hand.

She then looked to the green light appearing from the blade and at the 1st-Gear residents in the audience.

She saw them crossing their arms or legs while watching her.

They were leaving it all to her, so…

…Yes.

She narrowed her eyes, nodded their way, and turned back to the boy in front of her.

She had a single question for him.

“What is 1st-Gear to this world?”

“Good question.”

The stenographers’ hands could be heard moving as he spoke.

“The transfer of the non-humans to Low-Gear is likely the greatest problem faced by all the Gears, so I can say you are a valiant Gear for working towards a solution. In body, you refuse to run. In soul, you refuse to be cowed.”

He took a breath.

“This is an honorable act that will save the non-humans of every Gear.”

As soon as she heard his words and the sounds of the stenographers recording them, Brunhild produced a much louder sound.

She had forcefully taken a seat.

At the same time, she placed Requiem Sense on the desk with the handle pointed toward Sayama and she mouthed someone’s name just once.

She pulled her hat low to hide her lips as they called the name of someone she knew well yet would never meet again.

“Then 1st-Gear…”

She gathered her strength and raised her voice to a shout.

“1st-Gear desires to embody the word ‘honor’ and exist within Low-Gear!”

●

From the neighboring seat, Tsukuyomi watched the small witch sit down.

The woman then faced forward and saw Sayama looking her way.

She glanced up at the ceiling as the light above her switched on.

What a pain, she muttered in her heart.

…I’m always pulled around by this boy.

He was either always at the center of trouble or he had a way of causing trouble.

But Kashima’s family seemed to be doing well and Yamata had been resealed within Totsuka.

Also, the name Tsukuyomi was the imperial name of the one who tracked the progress of the moon and compiled history.

So with an understanding of her role, Tsukuyomi listened to Sayama.

“Do you have something to say, representative from the world of the dragon of names?”

Chapter 26

"A Frank Chat About Destruction"

If I am destruction
Why do you search for me
When I am only hiding?

●

Mornings began early for the Tamiya family that ran an influential Akigawa security company.

The house was surrounded by a fence and it was always busy since it doubled as lodgings for the day and night shift security guards.

However, Ryouko was a late riser. Or rather, morning for her began when someone came to wake her.

She was woken to be present for the switch between the day and night shifts, but according to her…

“Why are you always waking me up, Kouji!?”

While according to Kouji…

“Because you never wake up on your own!”

And if you asked Sayama…

“Ha ha ha. This world functions on a give-or-take basis. Just like Shinjou-kun and me.”

But today, Ryouko had woken on her own.

She opened her room’s sliding screen that bordered the central courtyard, yawned, and stepped out in her yukata.

She stood below the eaves to avoid the nearly midday sun and she gathered up her lowered hair in the chilly air.

“Where’s Kouji?”

The wall answered her with a male voice.

“He said he had some business to take care of.”

“Business? Does he have any other daily jobs than waking me up and cooking?”

“Why of course!!”

She pulled a handgun from her pocket, pressed it to the wall, and gave the wall a sleepy smile.

“Again.”

“Ha…ha ha ha. Yeah, I think that’s about all he does!”

“Don’t insult Kouji!!”

She pushed down the hammer and the wall panicked.

“P-please wake up, president!!”

“C’mon, not so loud, Li-san. Walls don’t talk. Talk and I shoot.”

“…”

“Good, good. That’s how a wall should act. …So where’s Kouji? If you don’t answer, I’ll shoot.”

“Ahhhh! But you just told me not to talk! Kouji-san! Kouji-saaaan! Hellllllllp meeeeeeee!”

The wall screamed and footsteps ran down the hallway.

Ryouko turned around just as Kouji slid on his socks and came to a stop.

Before she could greet him, he spoke clearly.

“Sister, you’re being unreasonable again, aren’t you!?”

“C’mon, I’m a girl, so you need to smile and forgive a little bit of unreasonableness.”

“Girl?” asked the wall behind her.

She turned around and fired.

“Ah, sister! I only just had that plaster redone! Don’t shoot holes in it!”

“Th-there’s a hole on what’s inside, too!” shouted the wall.

“Now, Kouji, answer me. …Why didn’t you come wake me up?”

“Well…” He briefly hesitated. “Shino-san has vanished. And for some reason, Pes was kneeling down in the yard.”

“Ehhh!? K-Kouji, did you do something perverted again!?”

“No! And what do you mean ‘again’!?”

“What!? You mean you’ve never done it at your age? You awful human being! You living falling birthrate policy!”

“That is not the issue here and quit twisting my words! And Li-san, just because you’re over forty is no reason to start crying inside the wall there.”

Kouji crossed his arms and looked at Ryouko who was lifting her hair with a hair pin in her mouth.

“You don’t seem too surprised,” he said. “Do you know where Shino-san is?”

“Hm? Of course not. I’m not an esper.”

“No one uses the word esper anymore, sister.”

“Sh-shut up. Stop giving me that look of pity. A-ny-way, if Shi-chan left, then that’s fine.”

She stuck the hair pin in her hair.

“It was her decision, right? She isn’t a child anymore, so she had to have a good reason to leave and we would be insulting her resolve if we found her and dragged her back.”

“What if she left because she wanted us to find her?”

“When the injured or sick leave, it’s because they don’t want to be a burden, just like with an old cat. …If the one they’re a burden on approaches, they’ll just run away.”

“Then…”

“There is no ‘then’.” Ryouko gave Kouji a confused look. “Shi-chan can run away if she wants. And if she tries to return, then we really have to take care of her. That would mean this is her only option even though she doesn’t like it.”

She waved a hand to shoo her brother away.

“Go, go. Get back to your work. We can leave the rest up to fate.”

She fired thrice into the wall to drive away the people inside.

She was now alone.

“Okay.”

She breathed in the chilly air and suddenly looked up into the sky.

With her gaze on the blue winter sky, she placed her hands on her hips.

“After I change, I think I’ll go for a walk outside.”

●

2nd-Gear’s Tsukuyomi asked a question below the library’s light.

She crossed her arms in her lab coat as if trying to defend herself.

“When our Gear was on the verge of destruction, it seems the Low-Gear engineer who should have saved it took too long to make up his mind.”

She spoke plainly and Sayama nodded and crossed his arms as well.

“That is true and I believe we went over all this during the Leviathan Road. Are you digging it back up?”

“Of course not,” she began with a shrug. “There is one thing I want to ask for the sake of the coming new world.”

The witch sitting next to her wrote what she said in glowing words:

“If Low-Gear is faced with the same situation, what would it do?”

She nodded.

“Yes, if the destruction of the world were approaching at overwhelming speed, how would you handle it?”

A pause followed her question.

During that wordless and still pause, the only sounds came from the stenographers, but Tsukuyomi herself finally broke it.

“If you wish to support the world, you must be able to ensure the world will not be destroyed no matter what happens. Surely you aren’t going to tell me you hadn’t given it any thought.”

“To be honest, I hadn’t thought about that at all.”

Sayama’s casual response left Tsukuyomi speechless.

And that was why everyone’s focus turned from her and to him.

With all eyes on him, the boy spread his arms, breathed in, and stared directly at Tsukuyomi.

“Tsukuyomi-kun, you are talking about what we should do when faced with the destruction of the world, but I have a question.”

He held up his left index finger and everyone focused on that single point.

“By any chance, do you happen to know how the world will be destroyed?”

“Well…”

Of course she did not. That was why she had asked what Low-Gear would do. But…

“Not a single person knows, so I have no way of answering your question.”

Sayama peered at her and thought for a moment.

“But you are a worrier, aren’t you? You think the world might very well be destroyed. So…”

He spread his arms again.

“I have a suggestion. If, after this meeting has ended, Low-Gear has been forgiven and allowed to exist, I would like to create a Destruction Information and Countermeasures Research Team.”

“Destruction Information and Countermeasures Research Team?”

“Yes.” Sayama raised his arms. “Or the DIC Research Team for short!!”

“Don’t abbreviate it like that!”

●

Tsukuyomi reflexively protested Sayama’s abbreviation, but then she frantically looked around.

“Ah!? See! Now that awful term is part of the entire world’s history!”

“Wh-what are you talking about, Tsukuyomi-kun? I merely abbreviated it to DIC! Nothing could be as grand as DIC! DIC is what you call a youthful power! What in the world could be wrong with DIC!?”

対崩警研究班

“Stop saying that!! I demand you propose a better name!”

“A better DIC!!”

“Gwah!”

Tsukuyomi collapsed backwards, but Miyako cackled next to her.

“What? You got a problem with DIC? Then go to Ueno and have it cut down to size!”

Tsukuyomi glared at her daughter, but #8 ignored them and spoke.

“Sayama-sama, I believe everyone knows what you are trying to say, so why not leave it at that?”

“Yes, I was getting the same feeling.”

He nodded and turned back toward Tsukuyomi.

She had stopped crossing her arms and had her hands in her lab coat’s pockets instead.

He stuck his hands in his suit pockets to match.

“Well, you get the idea, Tsukuyomi-kun. All we can do is set up an antenna to detect any possible destruction and, in an emergency, gather the humans of every Gear… no.”

He took a breath.

“Gather the residents of what will then be a single Gear and do everything we can do without giving up. At the very least, I can promise the people of Japanese UCAT will not give up.”

“So you’re telling us from 2nd-Gear not to foolishly lose our home for a second time?”

“And to that end, how about you record your history here? Your long history can double as a lesson from the past.”

“Eh?”

Tsukuyomi’s question was immediately followed by Sayama looking up at the unseen sky and opening his mouth.

“The wind carries names, techniques, and a heart that never forgets itself. And that wind blows in the direction you are facing. No matter how often it moves, it will never vanish. And I believe passing on your history is the job of the one with the name of the moon. Also…”

He took a breath.

“We can make more history now, can we not? Tsukuyomi-kun, the history of the past is finite, but the future is – annoyingly enough – infinite. So if you record your history here, that lesson from the past will protect both the present and the future that we will be creating from now on.”

He placed his hands on his desk and leaned forward, but breathed in to cool down his lungs.

“Looking back to the lessons of the past will help prevent the destruction of the world. So… Yes, if you wish to pass on 2nd-Gear’s history, then get to work. We will prepare as much personnel as you need. Everyone has far too much time on their hands anyway.”

He then shouted to the Gear representatives sitting in the darkness.

“The same goes for the other Gears. If you wish to record your history and your world, then bring it on! But…once you finish, join us in this world! The history to come will be much, much longer! After all…”

As he continued, Tsukuyomi dropped exhausted into her seat.

“After all, every Gear will work together against the destruction to ensure we can continue on! And I appoint 2nd-Gear’s development department as the leader of that alliance. Use as much money and personnel as you like. The continuation of the world and of history is on the line!”

Tsukuyomi raised both hands in resignation.

“Fine, fine,” she muttered in exasperation. “Honestly, you cause nothing but trouble.”

●

As soon as Tsukuyomi sat down, someone else stood up and light washed over them.

However, Miyako was still seated at the desk of 3rd-Gear’s representative.

“Gyes-kun, are you the representative?”

“Yes, sir.”

Gyes nodded and looked to the boy directly ahead of her.

“This is an important time for Lady Miyako. We cannot have her standing for too long.”

“I see. Then you will be saying what you have to say, will you?”

“I will,” agreed Gyes.

The question-and-answer session with the next Gear began.

Everything seemed to click into place as the questions and suggestions continued smoothly.

Chapter 27

“Charity of Lies”

What’s wrong with that?
If I don’t keep my word
You can punch me

●

The meeting continued inside the Kinugasa Library.

To help, Shinjou and Heo worked in Low-Gear's waiting room and Kazami helped some too.

At the moment, Kazami showed up with the report on the question-and-answer session with 3rd-Gear. An automaton secretary had written it.

Shinjou was writing her own report while checking on the progress of the questions and answers in the library.

The questions and answers were generally a confirmation and expansion on the negotiations held during the Leviathan Road.

The conversation was all recorded in the log created by the automatons.

The log was like a script with stage directions and it included notes by the automaton in charge of its creation.

Shinjou currently held the log of 3rd-Gear's question-and-answer session created by #73.

In it, they were confirming Gyes and Sayama's beach negotiation that Shinjou had been present for.

Gyes was standing in for Miyako and she was cautious of Sayama.

After all, he was the person who had made Gyes, an automaton, lie.

So she began by asking him to prove that the result of the questions and answers would not be a lie.

Gyes-sama: "What proof do we have that everything you are saying here isn't a lie? And if it is a lie, who will punish Low-Gear for it?"

Note: Wow, that's harsh. She really doesn't trust him!

Gyes-sama: "Can you answer me, Sayama Mikoto!"

Sayama-sama: "Yes. I can answer with utmost ease!"

Note: Gyes-sama grows cautious. She and all the 3rd automatons in the audience seats take defensive stances and cover their ears.

Gyes-sama: "Ready your anti-sophistry stances!! Even our gravitational control is useless against this boy's sophistry!"

Note: Sayama-sama nods repeatedly with a smile.

Sayama-sama: "Ha ha ha. What are you so worried about, Gyes-kun? I am perfectly safe."

Gyes-sama: "No, you're unbelievably dangerous!! L-Lady Miyako! The Sayama Virus is going to get in through your ears!"

Miyako-sama: "It doesn't really matter."

Gyes-sama: "You are so tolerant, Lady Miyako! But you still need to put in some earplugs."

Note: Gyes-sama digs through her pocket.

Gyes-sama: "Lady Miyako! I prepared these chocolate pencils as emergency rations, but use them as temporary earplugs!"

Miyako-sama: "I've never heard of ear-pencils before. It sounds pretty crazy to me."

As she read through the log, Shinjou began to worry about the sanity of the meeting.

…Well, I'm not actually taking part, so it's not my place to worry.

She decided to conclude only a certain sort of chosen person belonged there.

Eventually, Miyako began to take a more active role. In the log, she began speaking with Sayama after calming Gyes down.

Miyako-sama: "Sorry for eating chocolate while we talk, Sayama. But regardless…"

Gyes-sama: "W-wait, Lady Miyako! Are you sure you should be speaking with…that?"

Miyako-sama: "It'll be fine. If he pisses me off too much, I just have to knock him over…with a god of war fist."

Sayama-sama: "That is rather extreme, but is it a form of threat?"

Miyako-sama: "Don't be ridiculous. If I was threatening you, I'd grab you by the collar. As long as we just have a nice chat here, I won't have to surpass the Code of Hammurabi for some highly damaging revenge, so just answer Gyes's question. Prove that you're serious about what you say here and tell us who will punish you if you are lying."

Sayama gave a single answer to Miyako's demand.

He put forth one of the foundations of negotiation.

"The result of a discussion is not the sole responsibility of just one party."

To negotiate was to deal with each other on equal ground.

So whether the result would be upheld was a problem for both sides.

And that was why Sayama said what he did.

Sayama-sama: “If we are truly thinking about each other and we both feel this is our duty, neither side will break the result of the Leviathan Road or this question-and-answer session. But in the unlikely event that one of us does break our promise, how about we create an organization to punish them?”

During the summer negotiation on the beach, 3rd-Gear had hinted at a certain possibility: what if they used their military might to guard the Gear reservations?

Sayama expanded on that in his suggestion.

If they did create a new world, they would need a policing organization and a punishment system for the forces of every Gear.

Sayama-sama: “And in the new world, we will need to guard against and suppress any who violate agreements or commit any other illegal acts. I would like for 3rd-Gear to help us with that using your restless automatons and gods of war. How about that?”

Miyako-sama: “Are you serious?”

Sayama-sama: “Yes, I am. So if, after this meeting has ended, Low-Gear has been forgiven and allowed to exist, I would like to create a 3rd-centric police agency for the coming world. But the other Gears also have plenty of combat-oriented races. Open the door to them and create an enjoyable and open punishment agency that the people will accept. UCAT’s planning department will surely assist you.”

Miyako-sama: “Wait, wait. I wouldn’t make a very good police officer.”

Sayama-sama: “But what about Apollo-kun? Why not make him chief of police?”

With that, the question-and-answer session with 3rd ended.

The question-and-answer session with 4th had apparently been starting when Kazami had taken the log out to the waiting room.

4th had said they “want to work” and Sayama had begun speaking about working in a medical facility.

…I see.

With that thought, Shinjou set down the log and reminded herself that Sayama and the others were working hard.

“I need to work hard too.”

As she neared the end of the report, she began discussing the postwar period and her parents’ generation.

…There’s still a lot to write.

However, she had written up a general plot the night before and Sayama had checked through it.

He had taught her how to minimize the amount of actual text by using photographs and quotations effectively.

Now, she only had to write it all.

Their greatest defense was to convey only the truth without including any guesses about what they had seen, what they had learned, or what they did not understand.

What had happened and what had not happened? There were a lot of unknowns, but there were no lies in what they did know.

It was neat hearing Kazami’s surprised comments next to her.

Just once, she directly addressed Shinjou while doing her job.

“That must have been tough, but you must be glad.”

“Yeah.”

Was she wrong to think that short answer was enough to get everything across?

If the world was not destroyed by the activation of the negative concepts, then she wanted to learn about much, much more. After all, she had not seen much of Izumo where her great-grandparents had lived and she had yet to see Professor Kinugasa’s home.

…And a certain someone says he left that cabin without taking down the posters of me he didn’t have permission to make!!

Once spring came, there was a danger of hikers wandering there and anyone would find it bizarre if they saw brand-new posters hanging in a run-down cabin in the mountains.

Shinjou then heard Heo sigh.

“What is it?” she asked.

Heo rolled her shoulders a bit and smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

“This isn’t going well.”

“It can’t be easy thinking up all the different patterns,” agreed Shinjou.

Kazami turned to Heo, too.

“Isn’t it about time for your question-and-answer session? I’m glad I don’t have one of those.”

She was referring to 5th-Gear’s question-and-answer session. Harakawa was sitting out there for Heo, but she would need to head out once the questioning began.

Kazami crossed her legs, took a breath, and stretched her weary arms forward.

“I thought I would end up as a representative for 10th-Gear, but it seems they and Jord have come to an understanding in their view of Low-Gear.”

She closed her eyes just a bit and some resignation filled her voice.

“The gods of 10th-Gear can be pretty exclusive. Kaku sometimes exposes things, though.”

Heo gasped at that.

After a short pause, she looked to Kazami and slowly asked for confirmation.

“Izumo exposes himself?”

Kazami silently stood from her chair, so Shinjou focused on her work.

She heard Kazami snap her fingers and Heo frantically speak up.

“Ah, w-wait, Kazami. My, um, uh, Japanese still isn’t very good, so…!”

“Yes, that way I know no one outside will be able to understand your protests.”

Heo gave an extended shriek as Kazami began cracking the smaller girl’s arms and other joints.

She was using a body of techniques known as seitai.

Heo cried out as she fell to the classroom floor and was forced into a strange pose.

“Ah, ahh! Kazami! If you do that…it’ll get rid of my stiff shoulders! Eek! Ah, n-no! You’re improving my blood flow so much my joints feel warm!”

Just listening to this is harmful, realized Shinjou just as Heo asked for help.

“Sh-Shinjou, why weren’t you Low-Gear’s representative?”

“Sayama-kun was the one who decided that.”

She had wondered why Kazami had been chosen, but…

“I think he wanted to be as fair as possible. I have some Top-Gear blood, so I could help to hold back Top-Gear if I stood on Low-Gear’s side, but…”

She looked to Kazami’s back as the girl massaged Heo.

“If anything, I think Kazami-san was the stronger candidate.”

“You just thought that up on the spot, didn’t you!?”

“Kidding. Just kidding. Kazami-san, I think you were perfect for the Low-Gear representative because you’re a perfectly norm-…someone who has no connection to the National Defense Department!”

“You changed your wording mid-sentence, didn’t you?”

“It sounded that way to me too,” added Heo.

Shinjou averted her gaze and continued working.

…Stay calm! Stay calm!

With this group, it was normal for horrible things to happen when you got something wrong, but that had a way of strengthening their bonds. She decided to dub it “cannibalism”.

And the best way to avoid getting caught in the middle of that cannibalism was to turn your back.

“But Sayama must be keeping a cool head to choose someone other than Shinjou for Low-Gear’s representative.”

“Heh heh. That’s not it, Heo. In Sayama’s mind, Shinjou is a resident of the thirteenth Gear: the Sayama Gear.”

Shinjou wanted to jump at that bait, but she resisted and focused on her work.

She wanted to correct them more than anything, but she resisted. Unfortunately, Heo replied with a very American kind of surprise.

“Oh, my god! What kind of aggressive concepts rule the Sayama Gear!?”

“Heh heh heh. Heo, that’s a difficult thing to describe. Or rather, I don’t want to describe it.”

“Can’t you overlook that last part and tell me!?”

“Fine then. Heh heh. To put it simply, when you say ‘no’, it transforms into ‘yes’. Also butts.”

“I-I’m not sure how to describe it, but it has a lot of touching and chance meetings to it, doesn’t it!?”

That’s surprisingly accurate!! thought Shinjou as she kept her eyes on the monitor and focused on her work.

“Do you know why Shinjou always resists what Sayama does?” asked Kazami.

“Y-yes. That’s how she gives permission, isn’t it!? The Japanese don’t know how to just say no!”

“That is not it!!”

When Shinjou finally turned around and shouted at them, she found Heo and Kazami smiling her way.

…Crap.

“Then what is it, Shinjou?”

“I’ve known you for a while now, but I certainly didn’t expect a denial there.”

“W-well, um…”

“Yes?” asked the two smiling girls.

But then…

“Heo-sama, the question-and-answer session with 5th-Gear will be starting soon. Please get ready.”

The door opened and Sibyl entered, but something sounded off in Sibyl’s voice.

“D-did something happen?”

Shinjou turned back and noticed Sibyl’s eyebrows were a bit raised.

“I do not think it is much of an issue, but Sayama-sama is having some trouble with 4th-Gear’s question-and-answer session.”

“With 4th-Gear?”

That was the Gear he was closest with, so if he was having trouble…

…What’s going on?

Sibyl must have seen something in her expression because she breathed in to gather her strength and reformed her smile.

“At any rate, the meeting is in progress.”

●

#8 was unsure what to think.

But not because 4th-Gear’s two representatives had left their seats and walked all the way up to Sayama’s desk.

It was because Sayama was having a bit of trouble handling what they were saying.

At first, the 4th-Gear residents had asked if they would be “given food”. They were animals that lived off of heat, so they wanted a place to acquire that.

…And Sayama-sama said UCAT would build a medical facility.

However, the plant creatures then asked something else.

“Sayama bullied. Why?”

#8 could guess it was an honest question. In a question-and-answer session, the answerer was on the defense and the 4th-Gear residents were describing that as Sayama being “bullied”.

“Why?”

They were worried because they trusted him and the two of them asked him about it with identical thoughts.

“Bullying uncool. Bullying bad. So why? Why Sayama bullied?”

“Is it enough to say this is necessary?”

“No. Not necessary.”

The 4th-Gear residents pleaded to Sayama.

“Sayama with everyone.”

“Bullying Sayama is bullying everyone.”

“4th-Gear with Sayama.”

“4th-Gear feels it. Feels being bullied.”

All motion vanished and everyone was left speechless.

#8 wondered if the residents of every Gear and representatives of every UCAT had realized the danger of 4th-Gear.

4th-Gear did not doubt those it trusted. If it trusted them, it doubted them as little as people doubted themselves.

And because 4th-Gear trusted everyone, it felt everyone’s pain, even in a simple question-and-answer session.

Could one really speak with someone like that?

However, the 4th-Gear residents did not even understand that.

They were simply worried for Sayama.

“With Sayama, but Sayama bullied. 4th-Gear bullying Sayama too. At odds? Not together?”

“Want to be together, but not?”

And…

“Contradiction?”

Sayama reacted to that question. He crossed his arms and opened his mouth to say something.

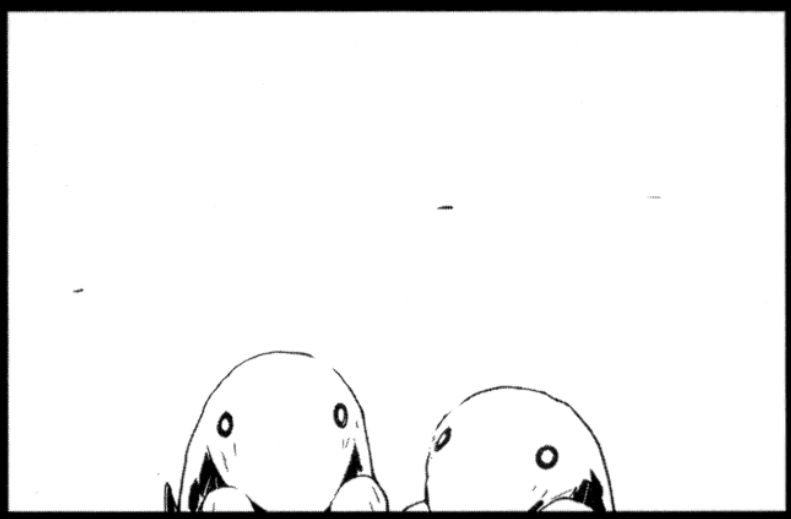
But just as he did, a dignified voice rang from the darkness by the counter.

“It is not a contradiction!”

#8 saw a girl in a uniform standing below a new light that activated by the counter.
She continued walking and spoke with a powerful smile.
“This is Kazami Chisato. As Low-Gear representative, I will answer as assistant negotiator.”

Chapter 28

“There and Not There”



Want to be together
Want to be with you
Want to be

●

Kazami descended to the bottom of the Kinugasa Library and continued forward.

In the dim light, she noticed how different the library looked without all the bookshelves.

“Now, how about we have a little cha-…”

“Objection!”

Hajji shouted from the darkness behind her.

She did not even need to turn around as his powerful voice reached her.

“Moderator! Are assistant negotiators allowed!?”

She had already predicted this and Sf nodded her way.

“Self-proclaimed assistant negotiator, please state your reason for this request.”

She had expected this question, so she looked ahead and just a bit up to the moderator’s seat.

“If Sayama is the negotiator because he is Low-Gear’s representative, then is there any reason why I can’t negotiate as the other Low-Gear representative?”

She closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and shouted into the floor so it would bounce back to the darkness behind her.

“State your reason for denying my request!!”

She breathed in through her nose and then faced forward once more.

Two plant creatures stood with their front legs on the edge of Sayama’s desk.

She crouched down to put herself on the same level as them and they tilted their heads.

“Kazami?”

“Oh, you know me?”

The one creature nodded and slowly continued.

“Ape Killer.”

“English? Did Heo teach you that!?”

Her shout received a response from the darkness behind her.

“I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry, but I didn’t mean anything by it!”

“Hm. I see. That’s a relief. …So that means it’s what you actually think?”

Heo shrieked and a new voice came from the darkness to her right.

“Colonel, colonel! I believe Miss Heo was at fault this time! Lowering your right hand would be the tolerant thing to do!”

This has gotten dangerous, sighed Kazami.

She ignored all the eyes focused on her and saw the plant creatures looking at her.

“Contradiction,” one said.

In other words…

“You want to know why you’re bullying Sayama when you’re supposedly with him, right?”

“Right!”

The 4th-Gear creatures shouted in agreement, left the desk, and approached her. When she saw them looking up at her, she did her best to maintain a composed expression.

…Nwah! I want to take them home with me! And they refresh your exhaustion, too!

She forced down those thoughts and spoke.

It all comes down to this, she thought.

“Listen. There is no contradiction.”

●

Both 4th-Gear creatures tilted their heads in front of Kazami.

“Why not?”

“Well,” she began.

She knew the gist of what she had to say.

…Because this is somewhat like me.

“The thing is, Sayama isn’t with you yet.”

Sound reached her from the surrounding darkness. It was a questioning sound taking the form of countless people uttering “eh?”

She knew why. During the Leviathan Road with 4th-Gear, 4th had decided to go with Sayama and Shinjou. They were the same, so they went with them.

But Kazami had overturned that assumption and she was not done there.

“Do you get it? Low-Gear hasn’t come to join you yet.”

She did not immediately receive a response.

The two plant creatures first leaned up against each other and then pulled back away from her.

“Tricked us?”

They aren’t making this easy, are they? thought Kazami while mentally taken aback.

However, that would not resolve this situation, so…

“He did not trick you.”

“How?”

“It’s simple. You have gone to be with Sayama, but Sayama has yet to come be with you. You lost your world, remember?”

The two creatures looked up at the ceiling for about three seconds.

“Moved.”

“Yes, yes. That’s right. You moved to a new world. …And you know what? Sayama’s grandfather and his friends had everyone here move too. But unlike all of them, Sayama hasn’t moved, has he?”

The plant creatures thought on that for a moment.

“Sayama didn’t. Didn’t move like that.”

“Then Sayama isn’t the same as you yet, is he? You moved here, so you’re with Sayama, but he was already here and hasn’t moved.”

“Contradiction?”

“Yes.”

Kazami’s smile grew.

…It’s going to get through to them. It’s going to be okay. It’s going to work.

After making three “it’s going to” phrases in her heart, she continued speaking.

“And you know what else? Bullying Sayama here is instead of having him move to this world.”

“Why?”

“When you moved, your world disappeared, right? That’s because your world was bullied. That means this world needs to be bullied, too.”

“Bullying makes Low-Gear and other Gears the same?”

“Yes. All the other Gears were bullied when they moved, so Low-Gear has to be bullied and move. But if Low-Gear disappeared, we couldn’t be together, so Sayama is being bullied instead.”

“Sayama is?”

“Yes.”

Kazami saw the creatures rise up and look at her from either side.

…Nwaaah! I want to grab one in each arm and take them home!

She resisted the urge and spoke to the two plant creatures.

“Sayama won’t disappear even when he’s bullied. Because he’s a pervert. That’s why Sayama is being bullied instead of the world, which would disappear.”

“Is okay? Is Sayama okay?”

Kazami finally looked away, past the desk, and to Sayama.

The plant creatures looked that way too and the boy in a suit placed a hand on his chin.

His sharp eyes looked her in the eye, he gave a quick nod, and he thrust his arms out to either side for some reason.

“With ease!”

“With ease!?”

“Yes. I am pummeled day and night by Shinjou-kun’s many terms of affection, yet I have not given in. What more proof do you need that I can easily endure ten or twenty times the bullying that would destroy a world!?”

“Shinjou harsh!?”

“Extremely!! She refuses to be honest with herself!!”

His announcement was followed by footsteps rushing toward the library entrance behind him.

“Wait, Sayama-kun! This is no time for your nonsen- Oh, Sibyl-san. And Ooki too!?”

Her shouting voice was promptly dragged outside.

What was she hoping to accomplish? wondered Kazami as the plant creatures tilted their heads in her direction.

“With ease?”

“Yes, with ease. With utmost ease.”

Kazami took a breath and stood up. The 4th-Gear creatures looked up at the movement of air she caused.

She then looked them both in the eye.

“So listen. Bullying Sayama will allow him to come be with you, so you mustn’t prevent anyone else from bullying him.”

The plant creatures nodded.

“Strange.”

“What is?”

“All the worlds here. So 4th-Gear with the worlds.”

“Everything still here because Sayama here?”

“Yes,” said Kazami. “Because you’re here, because everyone is here, and because we are all trying to be together, the world will not be lost.”

“The same? Everyone the same as Sayama? Pervert?”

“That isn’t how I would put it…”

However, the 4th-Gear creatures looked to Sayama again.

“Sayama wonderful! Wonderful Sayama!”

And they looked around.

“Everyone wonderful!!”

That shout produced a sound from their surroundings.

In the unlit darkness, Kazami saw everyone in the audience seats and representative seats stand up at once.

They all immediately gave a bow or otherwise indicated their respect for the plant creatures.

As soon as they finished, they sat down and calm noisily returned.

“…”

The brief sound and motion had all been in the darkness, so it almost felt like an illusion or a momentary dream.

However, Kazami let out a breath, looked to the creatures at her feet, and faced the representative seats.

“Tell everyone thank you. …Now, let’s get going.”

The creatures lined up, looked up at her, and seemed to nod.

“Thank you, Ape Killer.”

“Heooooooo!!”

A shriek came from the representative seats and Sayama cleared his throat before speaking.

“Next is Heo-kun for 5th-Gear, so please try to remain quiet.”

“How about you thank me first? If you were in need of some help, I’d like to hear some appreciation. And if you didn’t need any help, then I successfully managed to steal your negotiation thunder. …Which would you prefer?”

“How about I say you should mind your own business next time?”

She did not turn around, but the bitter smile she heard in his voice was enough to satisfy her.

…That underclassman needs to be more honest.

She gave a bitter smile of her own and started toward the representative seats with the 4th-Gear creatures.

“Now, then… Heo! You’re up!”

●

Heo reflexively stood when she was called.

Um… she muttered in her heart before realizing something.

…5th-Gear’s question-and-answer session has already started.

Oops, she thought.

She had prepared a lot to say, but she was not yet mentally prepared.

She had been so impressed by Kazami’s discussion with the plant creatures that this had caught her by surprise.

“————————”

She was not sure what to do.

“Oh…”

She suddenly realized her mind was completely blank.

The light was shining on her, but there were a lot of figures visible in the shadows and their eyes reflected the light back toward her. She started by opening her mouth to say something.

“…”

But only a tense breath escaped.

That was when she finally realized something.

…Am I nervous?

“Eh? Um…”

She forced her voice out, but that was all that left her throat.

It surprised her to realize she had stage fright.

She felt her pulse begin to race and looked stiffly around.

But she could not see very well due to the tears that welled up in her eyes for some reason and she became even less sure what to do, but she knew she could not just stand here silently.

...H-Harakawa!

She tried to cling to Harakawa who sat next to her, but that was exactly when something tore through her body.

It came from directly in front of her.

“Boo!!”

Sayama’s unexpected shout made her jump and the tears scattered from her eyes.

“!?”

Her stiffness crumbled and became a tremor.

“Ah...”

Her voice leaked out and all strength left her body as if showing how defenseless she was.

Then everyone focused on her.

Their eyes all turned her way.

Her fear and the lack of the tension she needed to fight it caused Heo to seek power instead.

She let out a great cry that began with an “n”.

“Noooooooo!!”

A moment later, Thunder Fellow appeared in the Kinugasa Library.

Chapter 29

“Things Children Say”

When people see my spread arms
They call them wings

●

Roger saw a series of motion from his spot in the audience seats.

First, Heo gave a shout and Harakawa frantically tackled her from the side.

Most of the time, Thunder Fellow appeared behind her so she could be taken aboard, so he knocked her to the floor and out of the way.

…I haven't seen this in a while.

A mechanical dragon appeared in a gust of wind.

It was Thunder Fellow.

He appeared behind Heo and Harakawa who lay face down on the ground, so he seemed to be lying on top of them.

Roger then saw the nearly forty meter blue dragon extend his head toward the counter and his tail straight back.

The tail did not fit inside the library but escaped that difficulty by sticking into the preparation room. Sf tilted her head to avoid the tail, but if she had not, the top of her head would have been taken off.

Regardless, Sf spoke calmly.

"5th-Gear representative, please continue your question-and-answer session."

Her cold voice stopped everyone else from moving.

Roger then realized that it was their turn to be nervous and that Odor gave a satisfied nod toward the mechanical dragon below.

Roger followed his superior officer's gaze and saw Harakawa and Heo getting up.

Heo looked around, sighed, and finally seemed to notice what had happened.

"U-u-um… W-well, is everyone okay?"

No one responded. No one had the nerve to answer this girl who controlled a dragon.

The dragon acted as Heo's guardian and, to anyone who did not know her, he was nothing more than a large 5th-Gear weapon.

He could fly and easily shoot down steel monsters larger than himself.

And at the moment, the main cannon in his mouth and the secondary cannons on his shoulders were ready to fire.

Everyone here had received a report saying that the dragon only listened to her and that she was the most effective safety device for him.

But now that he appeared before their eyes, they could see something not mentioned in the report.

They instantly understood that Heo truly controlled 5th-Gear's power, so they all grew tense and thus silent.

If they said and did nothing, they would not be seen as an enemy.

If they did anything wrong, they could easily end up the target of the Concept War's most powerful individual weapon.

However, the dragon's head turned toward Heo and then to the left and right.

"Are you okay, Heo? And you, Harakawa?"

"We might have been even more okay if you hadn't shown up."

Harakawa sat cross-legged in the one meter space below Thunder Fellow's head and Heo sat next to him.

"U-um, sorry. I'm fine, okay?"

"Are you? But I sensed some kind of danger."

The room's temperature seemed to drop three degrees at that.

"Is this a battlefield? Have you been captured? I see people of other Gears. Are they enemies?"

"C-c-c-c-calm down, Thunder Fellow."

Roger agreed wholeheartedly with Heo and everyone present was united in spirit.

All the people seated around him had to be thinking the same thing: Spare me. Please, please spare me.

…Praise god for this harmony between us all. If this is what a united republic feels like, perhaps I should vote Republican next election.

The only people who still appeared calm were Odor who sat next to Roger and Diana who sat in the German UCAT representative seat beyond Odor.

"See, honey? You bring these corners together, fold it like this, open it up, and…tah dah! It's a helmet."

"Hmm, hmm. So origami is a means of weaponizing paper! Such a frightening country!"

Is this a new way to escape reality!? wondered Roger, but he held his tongue because complicating the situation could easily make American UCAT the cause of the world's destruction.

While everyone nervously watched on, Heo stroked Thunder Fellow's throat.

"Calm down, Thunder Fellow. I'm fine."

She looked over her shoulder as she spoke and her voice contained her usual strength and smile.

“Everyone else is fine too, right?”

To ensure their safety, everyone shouted a response to the girl’s smile.

“Yes! Perfectly fine!!”

●

Heo breathed a sigh of relief at that answer.

Her shoulders fell and she faced forward from below Thunder Fellow.

“You hid under your desk, Sayama? You sure are careful.”

“Well, Heo-kun, I was given disaster training when I was younger.”

Sayama was crouched under his desk and he held tightly onto the desk legs.

“If you do this, you will remain safe even during a disaster.”

Heo wondered what he would do if Thunder Fellow lay down and kind of wanted to try it, but she resisted.

She sat below Thunder Fellow and Sayama below his desk, but it was Sayama who spoke first.

“Heo-kun, what do you want to do?”

“Eh?”

Wondering what to say, she looked to the side and found Harakawa with his back to her.

“H-Harakawa… Hey! Why are you reading Shounen Mazagine?”

“He asked what you want to do, so don’t worry about me. After all, I’m busy with this battle against the Dark Prince.”

“But… I already decided I wanted to have H with you!!”

Silence fell.

Huh? she wondered as she thought back on what she had said.

“I meant to say ‘become H with you’…”

Someone then spoke to her from the audience seats.

“H-Heo? As your teacher, I don’t think this is the place for that announcement.”

A light came on above Diana who wore a black suit and placed a hand on her cheek.

“First, you should probably talk it out with him. You can discuss how big a family you want.”

“T-teacher! Y-you mean children? B-but I’m still…um…”

“Oh, that’s right Heo. No one has even taught you how that’s done, have they?”

Diana’s cheek flushed below her hand.

“But it may be about time you learned about that adult secret. The truth is…babies are brought to couples by the stork.”

Three seconds of silence passed after her revelation.

Afterwards, Heo saw two people stand up from the representative seats: Hiba and Izumo.

They used eye and hand signals to coordinate with each other and moved in front of either the north or south audience seats.

They then lowered their hands and raised them on the count of three as a signal to Heo and everyone else.

“Ehhhhhh!? The stork!?”

“Wh-why are you all so shocked!? Don’t tell me none of you knew!”

“Ah! Izumo-san!” shouted Hiba. “This is so crazy that…I! I! I think I’m going to confess my love to you!!”

“That’s just creepy.”

“Wh-why are you taking it seriously!? Can’t you play along with the joke!?”

Heo saw Sayama shrug below his desk and sigh.

“Loving another boy? Honestly, you are such a pervert. You are just an unpleasant person overall.”

“Please take a look in the mirror! And at reality! Not to mention at how you act every day and at Shinjou-san!!”

“Yes, Shinjou-kun is incredibly cute.”

“Ah! This is hopeless!”

終わりのクロニクル

“All of you are hopeless!” shouted Diana’s dignified voice. She also brushed a hand through her long hair and puffed out her chest. “I was trying to have a serious discussion with my student and you bring up love between boys? …That is biologically wrong!”

“T-teacher! C-c-c-c-c-calm down, teacher. I’ll calm down, too.”

“I am perfectly fine, Heo. The problem is everyone around me. And…what is the matter, Heo? You were always such an excellent student, so why are you so flustered?”

“W-well…”

Heo calmed her breathing, but Diana asked a question as if making a finishing blow.

“Heo, are you trying to say I’ve made some kind of mistake?”

Awkward sweat quickly covered Heo’s entire body.

She could see Diana looking at her with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

…I feel like people have been testing me too much lately.

Um, but should I give the correct answer here? I’d only be correcting her, but the stenographers seem to be holding their pens awfully eagerly. Is this sexual harassment? Is that what this is? Um, um, um…

Fortunately, something released her from the pressure.

It was a voice. A male voice. It belonged to Odor who sat next to Diana.

“Diana, Diana! To preserve your honor, I must inform you that you are wrong.”

“Am I?”

Heo was relieved to hear her teacher’s surprised comment.

Odor was her husband, so it was appropriate for him to give her this kind of information.

“Diana, let me tell you where children really come from: they are born from cabbages.”

“Ahhhh!!”

Everyone cried out, breathed in, stomped thrice on the floor, and…

“You really are a couple, aren’t you!!!?”

Surprised, Diana raised her voice in protest, but everyone ignored her.

Sayama then spoke from below his desk.

“So what were you trying to say, Heo-kun? That you wish to be given a peaceful life with someone you care about?”

It was a sudden question.

The audience had yet to quiet down, so Heo just about answered “yes”.

“…”

But she said nothing.

She thought, hesitated for a moment, and then answered with a hand on Harakawa’s shoulder.

“N-no. If I have to be given peace, then I don’t want it.”

●

Heo placed a hand on her chest.

“I…want to take my studies seriously. I want to join a club, join a committee, go to school festivals, have the long vacations, do my homework, take midterm exams, take final exams, go to homeroom classes, have fun afterschool, stare out the window in class, stare into the sky through the hallway windows, and do so many other things.”

She was unsure if she should say the rest.

“And I know it’s asking for a lot, but I also want to go to college if possible.”

“You do not think that would be impossible, do you?”

“No,” she answered while leaning forward a little. “But that isn’t all.”

“I see. So you want something else after you earn a peaceful life?

“Yes. …It’s a pretty outrageous dream, though.”

She raised her right hand to stroke Thunder Fellow’s throat.

“If I see anyone trembling in fear, I want to reach out and save them.”

She then asked a question to everyone there instead of just Sayama.

“Is there anyone here who will lend me a free sky and who will not brush aside my outstretched hand?”

Her question had a single important meaning: would they allow her forty meter mechanical dragon inside their countries and reservations?

And this dragon was protected by powerful armor, could fly into satellite orbit under his own power, had a main cannon powerful enough to blow away a mountain range, and even had a stealth system.

However, Heo did not hesitate to ask.

“Will you let me form an international rescue team? I obviously won’t be enough on my own, so I would need some help…”

“American…American UCAT promises to provide assistance and free skies to your free dragon!!”

Surprised by Odor’s sudden agreement, Heo quickly stood up.

“Great-uncle!”

But her head slammed into Thunder Fellow’s throat armor and she collapsed back to the floor.

She loudly struck the ground and Thunder Fellow’s calm voice reached her from overhead.

“There was nothing I could do about that, Heo. I am glad you did not hit a sharper part, though.”

“S-so am I…”

Tears welled up in her eyes more from the surprise than the pain. She rubbed her head while still lying on the floor and found a bump had already formed.

…Oh, I hope this doesn’t damage my brain and make me go crazy.

She was surrounded by plenty of examples and she did not want to be like any of them.

“Hey, Heo.”

Harakawa lightly tapped the bump on her head, so she quickly stood up.

“S-stop, Harakawa! Don’t touch me in my sensitive spot. You’ll make me cry!”

“Stop saying things that make the stenographers so happy. And more importantly, look around you.”

She held her head with tears in her eyes and did as instructed.

She looked to the shadowy forms visible in the audience seats.

…They’re raising their hands.

Enough hands were raised to form a veritable forest of answers.

The more hesitant ones raised their own answering branches after seeing everyone around them.

“…”

Sf raised both of her guns toward the ceiling and fired a blank from each.

The deafening sound was accompanied by a slight wind.

“Tes. I will interpret this as an acceptance of 5th-Gear’s request.”

“Yes,” agreed Sayama. “It is an interesting idea. We could create branch offices in each country’s UCAT and station non-combat mechanical dragons and gods of war there. If 3rd is included, it would become quite a multi-purpose organization. …But Heo-kun, you would be the organization’s main force, so you could easily become so busy you lose your peaceful life. Are you sure you want that?”

“It’s fine.”

She brought a hand to her chest.

“I’ll make sure it’s fine.”

Sayama smiled at that and then laughed.

“Then I suppose it will be fine. …I too will accept your suggestion. Selfishly rescue the world all you want.”

Heo gave a cry of joy, jumped toward Harakawa, and embraced him.

“Harakawa! Harakawa! I’m so happy!”

And…

“This is great. Now I don’t have to worry when I give birth to the baby you put inside me.”

Everyone froze in place when they heard that.

Harakawa seemed to pass out briefly, but he finally asked a quiet question.

“…Are you having trouble with the Japanese language again?”

“No, not at all. After all…”

She tilted her head, wondering what this was about.

“Babies are made by kissing, right? And you kissed me, remember?”

A moment later, everyone’s voices exploded out for a variety of reasons.

Chapter 30

“How to Advance”

Now, what to do?
Now, what do I want to do?
Now, that has already been decided

●

Rocking had a surprising calming effect.

Shino woke when she sensed light and felt herself rocking.

…Huh?

The last thing she remembered, she had been lying down. She had collapsed onto the bench atop the central park's hill and been looking up into the dimly lit sky.

She had been wondering what she was doing.

But she saw something else now.

…The light is shining on some kind of red wall.

She was clinging to something warm and rocking.

As soon as she wondered what it was, the answer came to her and her body shot up.

"Ryouko!?"

"Wow!! Don't surprise me like that!!"

Ryouko was carrying Shino on her back. Because Shino suddenly sat up on the back of the woman's red kimono and because Ryouko bent backwards in surprise, they naturally lost their balance.

They were currently walking along the sunlit sidewalk running alongside a road, but it had no guardrails.

"Whoops. Uh-uh-uh-uh-oh."

Ryouko staggered and leaned back toward the road.

"Waaaaaah!"

"Eeeeeeek!"

Horns honked along the road and several dump trucks passed by.

Just as the trucks grazed the hair on the back of Shino's head and she cowered down, the exhaust and wind washed over Ryouko and she dug her heels in to force herself back toward the sidewalk.

Once they settled back on the sidewalk, the two of them breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief and Ryouko gave an exasperated comment.

"Are you okay, Shi-chan?"

After smiling to Shino, Ryouko faced forward and began walking, so Shino frantically spoke up from her back.

"U-um, you can put me down."

There was a lot she wanted to say, but she decided she had to say that first.

However, Ryouko did not even turn around to respond.

"Nope. I don't want you going off and leaving."

Shino shrank down at that.

What should I do? she wondered. She did not know how to explain this, what she should say if Ryouko asked, or what she should do in the future, but she knew she had to say something.

"Ryouko… You aren't mad?"

She gathered her resolve and asked, but Ryouko paused before simply tilting her head.

"I'm not sure." The woman groaned in thought. "The people who found you said you had to have your reasons."

"The people who found me?"

"That would be Taki-san and Ume-san who were homeless children fifty years ago and are still living that lifestyle to this day."

Ryouko looked back with a smile and noticed Shino had gone pale.

"Don't worry. They're not bad people. They just have some problems is all. …And you know what? I'm not too good at getting mad. It's so exhausting."

"I see," said Shino while relaxing her body and breathing in.

She then asked a question to the smiling face in front of her.

"Then you aren't going to ask why I ran away?"

"Do you want to tell me?"

She hesitated to answer that.

"Sometimes you feel better when you're asked."

Still looking at the girl, Ryouko nodded once, twice, and then thrice.

"You know what?"

She immediately followed that question by tripping spectacularly on the curb of the sidewalk.

Shino was almost thrown right onto the road and she spent some more time covered in a cold sweat.

“Y-you can face forward if you want.”

“But it’s rude not to look at people when you speak with them.”

Ryouko smiled bitterly, but then she faced forward and began walking again.

“If it feels better to talk about it, does that mean it’s painful to keep it to yourself? And because you’ll feel better if you talk about it, you want to do so? Am I right?”

“…Yes.”

“Wow! I was just making that up, but I got it right! Maybe I could be a fortune teller!”

Shino smiled a little when she saw Ryouko celebrating so seriously. She also wondered why the woman was letting so much slide.

But that was exactly why she hung her head and pressed her forehead against Ryouko’s back.

“I’m sorry.”

“Hm? Why are you apologizing?”

“Because…”

Ryouko’s back shook slightly and Shino heard a laugh.

Ryouko lifted her up further and rocked back and forth as if to comfort her.

“I don’t know your reason, so why do you need to apologize?”

“B-but that’s because I haven’t told you.”

“Then there’s no need to apologize,” immediately replied Ryouko. “After all, I wouldn’t know what the apology meant.”

Shino was speechless and Ryouko’s back shook in laughter again.

“But that’s fine since you’re so cute, Shi-chan. You can stay with us as long as you want. And if you want to run away, you can do that too. …You can keep trying until you actually get away.”

“B-but I’m…betraying all of you…”

“I don’t know why you’re doing any of that, so…” Ryouko spoke clearly. “I think running away is just part of who you are.”

“But…”

Shino’s response was not quite a full protest and she pressed it into Ryouko’s back along with her forehead.

She then breathed in, but the trembling breath broke apart.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why don’t you hate me?” She opened her mouth to let out her trembling voice. “Someone I thought of like a sister did. She pushed me away… The more I tried to be with her, the farther she would push me away.”

“Did you want her to care for you?”

Shino nodded ever so slightly and the action sent tears spilling from the corners of her eyes.

“I wanted to be with her like always…”

“You know what?”

Ryouko’s back shook in laughter again and she shifted Shino’s position on her back.

“A long time ago, I cared so very much about someone.”

“Eh?”

“This really is embarrassing,” said Ryouko with a shrug. “But I never said anything to that person or made any kind of move. Why do you think that was? It’s a simple answer: I was a coward.”

Ryouko stopped walking.

“I knew what they would say if I did say something. They would have been incredibly considerate and tried to keep things the same as always. …And that thought was such a burden on me.”

“So you didn’t do anything?”

“But you said something, didn’t you?”

“…”

“And did the person you care about say anything to you?”

“No,” she weakly answered while slowly looking back in her memories. “But she did try to distance me from what she was doing.”

“Is that so?” Ryouko nodded and began walking again. “Then she didn’t hate you. She would only try to distance you if she cared about you. If she hated you or didn’t care about you, she wouldn’t have cared one way or the other.”

“…”

Shino heard the woman laugh.

“That person must be a coward. She was worried about you and cared about you, but she didn’t know how to say it. And because she knew what you wanted, she had no idea what to do.”

Ryouko laughed again, but bitterly this time.

“I completely lost out when I did that.”

Shino could not even nod, but she did lean up against Ryouko’s back.

…I see.

She thought about one of the worries inside her.

…I’m sorry, Mikoku.

She had wanted Mikoku to be her usual self, but she only just now realized she herself had not been acting like her usual self.

And had Mikoku understood that about her? Had Mikoku noticed that she had decided for herself that Mikoku was rejecting her?

…If so…

What had Mikoku wanted of her but been unable to say?

…She was always telling me not to fight or not to do some other thing.

What was the opposite of fighting?

“…”

A certain thought came to Shino. It may have just been a convenient idea, but…

“Do I not have to fight?”

She thought it was a selfish idea. She thought it was simply a way of running away from the fighting.

But…

“If you don’t want to, Shi-chan, then that’s fine.”

Shino found her vision blurring at Ryouko’s acceptance.

…If Mikoku knew I wasn’t fighting and I was living with some kind people…

Would she be happy and not reject it?

While asking herself that, she gently clung to Ryouko’s back to confirm the answer for herself.

“Ryouko…”

There was so much she could not say and likely would never be able to say, but even though she remained silent, Ryouko spoke to her.

“Kouji said he was making some food and would be waiting for us. …Now, c’mon. That idiot said he was making Salisbury steak. How could he make something so greasy this early? And you prefer Japanese food, right?”

That brought a natural smile to Shino’s lips and more tears spilled from her eyes as she relaxed.

“But I like Kouji’s cooking.”

“That pedo has won you over better than I thought!! That is not the kind of news a sister wants to hear.”

Shino’s smile grew when she heard Ryouko’s laughter.

She then closed her eyes and rested on the woman’s back.

She rested on the back of someone from an opposite world, someone from an alternate version of her home, and someone she could perhaps call a sister.

…Mikoku.

She called that previous name in her heart and peacefully drifted off to sleep.

…I…

At the final moment, she breathed out and thought.

…I might have a sister and brother in this world, too.

●

Lunchtime scenes filled the waiting rooms.

A short recess had followed the end of 5th-Gear’s question-and-answer session, so all of the Gear and UCAT representatives had moved to the concept space used for their waiting rooms.

Team Leviathan had done the same.

Sibyl had used the cafeteria to create a large boxed lunch set as well as some soba and stew. Ooki had been blessed with quite a few snacks and drinks while walking around the festival, so the classroom desks were just about covered.

Everyone grabbed what they wanted, piled it on a plate, and got back to work from their spot in the room.

Heo and Kazami were the ones with the most work to do.

“Shinjou-kun, have you finished?”

“Yes. Now I’m just waiting for Kazami-san and Harakawa-kun’s translation. Once I check over the layout, it just has to be copied. We can probably have it all out before the question-and-answer session with 9th-Gear.”

“Thank you,” said Sayama before Shinjou held a takoyaki out toward him. He grabbed it and looked across the table.

He looked to Heo's back as she faced her laptop in Harakawa's window-side seat.

"Heo-kun, thank you for the valuable question-and-answer session. …Now, how is your work there going? Have you found a hole in the world creation theory presented by Hajji-kun?"

Shinjou followed his gaze and first saw Heo facing them.

The ends of the girl's eyebrows were lowered and she gave them a troubled smile.

"Sorry, but I just can't seem to find a hole."

Instead of tensing, her shoulders dropped straight down.

"Whenever the world is created from the mother element, it either plays out the way Kashima said or the way Hajji said. And only the latter is able to produce all twelve Gears."

"So the world is siding with them? How rude of it. Especially since I own it," said Sayama. "Well, not to worry. Before long, everyone will be residents of my world."

That might as well have been an announcement of his victory, so Shinjou exchanged a glance with the others.

And all of the others naturally looked to her as if urging her on.

…Why do I always get stuck doing this?

She sighed in her heart, faced Sayama, brushed back her hair, and tilted her head.

"How can you be so confident? And what do you mean by 'before long'?"

She sounded troubled, but he replied with a smile.

"I will tell you once you give me the drink you just set down."

She thought for a moment, looked around again, and found their gazes begging her to give it to him, but she could not help but worry over it a little longer.

"I-I'll give it to you after you answer me."

"Then I will answer," he said casually while crossing his legs in his chair. "Based on a few different facts we already know, I believe I can tear down Top-Gear's apparent advantage."

Shinjou was more surprised by what he said than by the refreshing tone of his voice.

"After the question-and-answer sessions, we will move onto the trial and vote. That will surely involve a comparison of Top-Gear's righteousness and the benefits of Low-Gear, but they will undoubtedly use their question-and-answer sessions to inform everyone just how cruel we were as we destroyed them."

He expressionlessly looked specifically at Shinjou as he continued.

"But what if it was not a cruel choice? What if it was inevitable?"

"Inevitable?" she asked.

"What if Top-Gear had to be destroyed like that?"

"…!?"

As the others gasped, Sayama grabbed Shinjou's cup from the table and gulped it down.

"Delicious! Truly an exceptional flavor!! It looked like coffee, so I never expected it to taste like this!"

"That's actually the extra soba sauce I put in a cup because I didn't have anything else to put it in."

"…Did your mouth ever touch it?"

"Of course not. You'd have to be an idiot to drink that. It's bad for your liver."

"For a variety of reasons, I demand a redo!!"

"Calm down," she said, so he nodded and sat down.

Then, as the representative of the others, Shinjou asked another question.

"Why do you think Top-Gear's destruction was inevitable?"

"Before I answer, I would like a redo with something your mouth actually touched."

"Kh."

Shinjou hung her head and clenched her fist while whispering voices reached her from behind.

"Kaku, why is Sayama so obsessed with indirect kisses?"

"Because a 5th-Gear VIP said direct kisses make babies."

"Th-that was only because I was negligent in my studies… But how are they really made?"

"Heo, Heo Thunderson. When you get back to the States, turn the TV on late at night. We can talk after that."

Shinjou sighed as the conversation continued behind her.

"Well, I'll give you something like that later, so can you please tell us? …Why do you think Top-Gear's destruction was inevitable? Do you have any evidence?"

"There is evidence, even if only circumstantial. And it can be found in the report you wrote. It is the last of the three things that your mother said only Low-Gear has."

"Eh?"

Shinjou frantically wondered if she had written anything like that.

“W-wait a minute. You know what that last thing is!?”

“I can only speculate at this point, so I cannot say for sure. Still, it is certain that Low-Gear has it.”

Sayama seemed to be confirming a fact for himself.

Shinjou was left speechless by how sudden this was, so she simply sat back down.

…Is there really something like what my mom mentioned?

She had used herself to answer Wanambi’s riddle. She did not know what the actual answer was, but Sayama claimed *something like that* did exist in Low-Gear.

And he had likely found whatever it was in the past and in the facts they had searched out.

“I plan to use this to our advantage in the question-and-answer session with Top-Gear.”

“I…see…”

Shinjou placed a finger on her forehead and thought for the span of a breath.

“But why would this thing that Low-Gear has make Top-Gear’s destruction inevitable?”

“It is a silly thing. A truly silly thing,” he said. “Yes, and that silly thing is why your mother moved to Top-Gear, why your father hesitated, and why my father decided to destroy Top-Gear. Also…”

“Also?”

“Top-Gear had to be destroyed and it was not in fact destroyed by my father’s hand. Because they attempted to lead all of the Gears, Top-Gear destroyed themselves.”

“!?”

The first to speak was Ooki.

“U-um, Sayama-kun!? Um, I…uh…well…”

“Sayama!” cut in Kazami. “If you say that without any definite proof, none of the Gears are going to believe a word you say! They’ll claim you’re making things up to escape Low-Gear’s crimes!”

“Th-that’s right! That’s what I was trying to say!”

Everyone did the right thing and ignored Ooki.

They all watched Sayama as he placed a hand on his crossed leg and pulled the knee toward himself.

“But stating this is the only way to win. As the evil ones, we must deny our crimes. And that is something only we can do because we were the ones to search out the evidence. Also, this is something only a villain like me can do.”

“B-but are you sure? If they argue back, they’ll be able to defeat such a ridiculous claim.”

He simply shrugged at Shinjou’s question.

“I still lack a few pieces of evidence and a lot still does not fit together, but I will of course be able to compensate for that. I would like to gather my thoughts and finish putting together my argument before the question-and-answer sessions with 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th have ended,” he said. “So please keep working until then, Heo-kun. If you find some kind of answer, it will surely help my argument.”

He then turned to Hiba and Izumo.

“8th’s session is sure to be short. Probably less than ten minutes. And I doubt 9th or 10th will give us much time to work with. So…I have one request.”

“You want us to buy you some time, Sayama-san?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I should be able to organize my thoughts if I have two hours to work with. I can likely extend the sessions with 9th and 10th to buy an hour, but 8th will likely only be ten minutes. So…you two need to buy me the remaining fifty minutes.”

“Fine then.”

Shinjou saw Izumo nod and scratch his head.

“I prefer to make sure every word out of my mouth is meaningful (except right before going to bed), but I guess I’ll have to make an exception.”

Kazami’s elbow struck him in the center of the gut.

●

In another waiting room, two people stared out the window as they ate.

One was Mikoku who wore a men’s black suit and the other was Tatsumi who wore a khaki-colored combat coat.

Mikoku sat parallel to the window on the windowsill and Tatsumi sat on top of four desks pushed together.

Mikoku patted the head of a large white dog sitting on the floor at her feet.

Tatsumi grabbed a convenience store bag and pulled out a can of beer she had bought off campus.

“I was afraid of this. It’s lukewarm now. Well, that strengthens the taste, so I guess it’s fine.”

“Do not drink too much. It would be a problem of something happened.”

“Don’t worry. My other self still hasn’t fully healed from the injuries he got somewhere.”

“Injuries?”

“That’s right,” said Tatsumi. “His left side wasn’t tensing up properly. He probably has a charm or something there.”

“I am amazed you can tell that.”

Mikoku stared out the window and took a bite of the hot dog she had bought at a festival stand.

Tatsumi’s voice reached her from behind.

“Do you enjoy looking out there?”

“This is my first time at a festival like this.”

“Don’t make excuses. Personally, I love festivals.”

“Even though it is a part of Low-Gear life?”

“We’re living our lives here too. Hating it will only make it feel more oppressive. You and Shino take all this so seriously, but…”

She heard a bitter laugh from Tatsumi.

“Are the two of you okay now?”

“I do not know,” replied Mikoku with a hand on her chest. “I…kind of think I am fine now. And Shino…Shino is apparently somewhere where she can live a normal life if she wants. And that sounds good to me.”

“Quit trying to act strong. Women who do that end up with nothing and lose so much. Did you know that?”

“Then I will head out and take what I want.”

Mikoku saw people in school uniforms and festival outfits walking around outside.

The stands sold their wares, music played, and the people were likely speaking.

But she could not reach any of it from here.

“There is nothing to worry about.”

She clenched the hand on her chest.

“It will reach.”

As soon as she said that, the classroom door opened.

When they heard the scraping of the rail, Tatsumi, Mikoku, and Shiro all turned around.

Someone wearing white stood in the door.

“Hajji?”

“Yes,” replied the man with his right hand covering his mouth. “The second half of the question-and-answer sessions is about to begin. But…”

Mikoku heard him laugh.

“Jord and I came up with a bit of a plan. How about we throw some more pressure onto Low-Gear? Hm? How about it, Mikoku? Are you in the mood for a challenge?”

“A challenge?”

“Yes.” Hajji spread his arms. “We can enjoy a nice debate with Low-Gear.”

●

At one in the afternoon, the question-and-answer sessions resumed.

Izumo sat with Boldman in the seats for 6th-Gear, but that was because V-Sw had chosen Izumo as its master and because Boldman, the primary representative, had suggested it.

6th-Gear had already joined UCAT and had only just lost the battle from the other day, so the question-and-answer sessions progressed smoothly with few issues.

As the people in the representative seats and audience seats listened to the discussion, they all felt it was progressing too quickly.

They all had their thoughts on the sudden announcement of this meeting, but they generally assumed Top-Gear had refused to give Low-Gear any time to think.

Every minute and second had to be valuable to Sayama, but a puzzled-looking Boldman worked through 6th-Gear’s session without issue.

In general, they agreed that the 6th-Gear people currently in UCAT’s standard and special divisions would be positioned around the world as personnel for the policing and rescue organizations 3rd and 5th would be setting up.

“As 6th-Gear’s people are already familiar with UCAT’s tactics and equipment, I can promise you they will be received as officers.”

With that, Sayama completed the question-and-answer session.

Only about five minutes had passed, making it the shortest of all the sessions so far.

Everyone looked to Sayama, wondering if he had a plan to buy some time to think or if he had thought out his argument enough to no longer need any time.

But just as Sf was going to declare 6th-Gear's session complete, Izumo stood up from the seat next to Boldman.

"Hold up. Are you serious about 6th-Gear's people getting to be officers? This bald guy's gonna be my superior?"

As he spoke to Sayama, he slapped the hairless head next to him.

"That's just gonna give him a swelled bald head."

Everyone gulped, but Boldman kept his head low and tried to resist.

"Not to worry," said Sayama. "If his head swells, he can be used to reenact the 'Hand-Washing Water' rakugo story."

"Ha ha ha. Isn't that great, Boldman? When you're bald, people believe you're just being modest. Isn't being bald great? It's hygienic, it helps you cool down, and…"

Izumo slapped Boldman's head like someone hitting a quiz show buzzer.

"And it looks indecent! It's just the best!"

Almost immediately, an enraged shout signaled the beginning of a violent brawl.

Chapter 31

“Strategy of Consideration”

Yes
We attempt to attain victory
By thinking of each other

●

Izumo and Boldman's fistfight ate up nearly fifteen minutes.

Sf ultimately drove them back with a stream of bullets, so they were being carried to the infirmary on stretchers.

Including the five minutes spent on that and the five minutes for the question-and-answer session itself, they had taken up a total of about twenty-five minutes.

But Hiba was worried as he watched Izumo's stretcher disappear out the library entrance.

…Is this really going to work out?

He also wondered how he was going to buy more time.

He could not pull off the same forcible physical comedy as Izumo, but Sayama had asked him and Izumo to buy him fifty minutes of time.

…I have to get the remaining twenty-five. Can I really do that?

He stood next to the representative chair and four colored spheres floated above the desk.

The spheres could not speak. They did seem to have wills of their own and they could move in response to questions, so some simple communication was possible.

…But they can't argue. How am I supposed to buy time like this?

The light above him turned on.

Once he realized everyone's eyes were on him, he briefly put up his guard, but…

"Um… I am Hiba Ryuuji, 7th-Gear's assistant representative."

Once he began speaking, he somehow made up his mind: he would do this normally.

The right thing to do in this situation was correctly identify himself, so…

"I belong to Japanese UCAT, I'm a first year at Taka-Akita Academy, I'm part of the automobile club there, I'm 168 cm tall, and I weigh 61 kilos, but I have low body fat. Also, my blood type is A and my hobby is peeping. My favorite food is anything Mikage-san has started making recently. Mikage-san is just so cute that I-…"

"Hiba boy, the world is recording this exposure of all your embarrassing secrets."

"Eh? D-did I say anything weird!?"

He looked around in surprise, but every single person there averted their gaze.

An unbearable silence fell and he could not bear to stand in the center of it.

"Ah! The entire world is ignoring me! Is this a first for humanity!?"

They were ignoring him, so naturally, no one responded. Instead, he looked to the seat on his right.

"C'mon, Kazami-san. Please turn this way. Look, it's your cute underclassman."

Kazami remained facing away from him, but G-Sp2's tip poked over her shoulder and toward him.

The weapon was already in firing mode and the console had a message for him: Stay back.

"Wow, even your pet weapon is cement-like!"

"Hiba boy. Do you have any questions for me?"

Hiba turned toward Sayama's voice, realized the other boy was looking at him, and gave a toothy grin.

"Sayama-san, you at least understand me, don't you!?"

"Yes," he said before looking to the audience seating on the left and right and giving a dry snap of his fingers.

"Stenographers, our previous statements could be misunderstood, so please strike it from the record."

"Ahh!! You monster!!"

"Continuing on, does anything come to mind as a request from 7th-Gear?" asked Sayama. "We inherited 7th-Gear during the previous battle and they already knew of the battle between Top-Gear and Low-Gear. Nevertheless, they personally gave us their Concept Core, so-…"

Before Sayama could finish, Hajji's voice rang out.

"Objection! Moderator, that Concept Core was created by a member of UCAT!"

His voice roared from the 9th-Gear seats.

"I believe the creator was acting on the 7th-Gear residents' instructions when she created it, but if they had known of Top-Gear's existence, don't you think they would have given their Core to Top-Gear instead!?"

Everyone gasped and Sf responded.

"Tes. I will allow this. …7th-Gear representative, please answer the question."

Hiba understood what the question meant.

…Doctor Chao was chosen to create the four brothers' Concept Core, but if 7th-Gear had known about Top-Gear, they would have chosen Top-Gear instead of her.

I see, he thought while Sayama gave him an expressionless look.

“What do you think as 7th-Gear’s assistant representative?”

Eh? he thought. *How am I supposed to know about something that happened so long ago?*

But as he wondered that, he saw the spheres floating around him.

The four colored spheres were the Concept Core the four brothers’ had become.

“Oh.”

He realized what Sayama meant, so he turned toward Hajji and spoke.

“Sorry, but that is not the case. If you think it is, then please make a correction! After all,” he began. “The four old men that were 7th-Gear’s Concept Core tested us to see if this world was worthy of inheriting their Concept Core. And they knew about Top-Gear. …If they had thought Top-Gear was ideal, they would have gone to Top-Gear and fought to be inherited there!”

Which meant…

“They stayed in Low-Gear of their own free will and here they still are!”

He yelled his conclusion, but Hajji asked another question.

“Then what if that desire to stay was implanted within them when they were created?”

Damn, he’s persistent, thought Hiba. *There’s no way I can answer that.*

But at that moment, Sayama’s voice interrupted his hesitant thoughts.

“Moderator, the 9th-Gear representative is asking a leading question with no evidence to back it up!”

Hiba saw Sf react to Sayama’s words by raising her machineguns.

“9th-Gear representative, do you have any evidence of that?”

Hajji shrugged.

“I take back my question. But…how fair is it to stick with Low-Gear’s interpretation when there is no evidence either way?”

“If there is no evidence, then you stick with the interpretation of the one who brought it up, Hajji-kun.”

“I see,” muttered the man and Hiba sighed in his heart.

If Sayama had not cut in, Hiba probably would have fallen for Hajji’s tricks.

And as he sighed in relief, Sayama faced him and placed a hand on his chin.

“Listen, Hiba boy. 7th-Gear will be an important case.”

“How…exactly?”

“There are no survivors of 7th-Gear’s people and the Concept Core will likely lose its form if it is released. That means we will be erasing all traces of 7th-Gear.”

Hiba fell silent, as did everyone else, so Sayama continued speaking.

“Does 7th-Gear find it acceptable to be erased?”

Hiba thought for a brief moment, but answered before any real thoughts reached his mind.

“That…would be fine.”

“Why is that?”

Hiba looked across everyone watching.

“7th-Gear left themselves to Low-Gear. They wanted this world to become the kind of world they yearned for: one they would never lose interest in.”

“I see.” Sayama nodded. “Then what do you think 7th-Gear wants of Low-Gear?”

“To always remain an interesting world.”

“In what way?”

Hiba thought about the four brothers they had fought.

“A law forcing everyone to adopt silly speech patterns that change on a daily bas-…”

The four spheres floating around him tackled him from four different directions: one to the chin, one to the right side, one to the solar plexus, and one to the crotch.

The sounds of impact were difficult to listen to. Especially the last one.

Hiba adopted an overly serious expression with his upper lip stretched down a bit.

He groaned, began hopping up and down, and heard Sayama speak.

“It would seem they punish you if you say anything they do not like. This helps show us what 7th-Gear thinks, so I suppose it is two birds with one stone.”

For about three minutes, Hiba bent over with his legs turned inwards, trying to catch his breath.

…Sigh. Am I actually buying some time here!?

For some reason his voice sounded high-pitched even in his mind and he looked to the clock.

Fifteen minutes had passed since the question-and-answer session had begun, so the question was whether he could buy another ten.

He began to think. He thought hard enough to begin sweating and forced up his doubled-over body.

Impressed cries came from the men in the audience seats.

“I-I really don’t understand why Yonkichi’s sphere attacked me for that one…”

“Everyone is harsher on other people’s jokes than on their own.”

That made an odd amount of sense, so Hiba lowered his hips and looked to Sayama who asked him a question.

“Do you think the trick to maintaining an interesting world is to let the world evolve?”

He just about said yes.

It made sense that an ever-evolving and thus ever-changing world would remain interesting.

…But…that’s not quite right.

“I don’t think evolving is the only way to keep the world interesting.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” he answered.

He suddenly reached into his pants pocket.

He grabbed two things and placed them on the desk in front of him.

“This is the philosopher’s stone in charge of Mikage-san’s evolution. It isn’t working anymore, though.”

Out of the left corner of his eye, he saw Tatsumi ignoring him and eating some grilled chicken from a festival stand.

He realized she was not acknowledging him and he knew his injuries had yet to heal, so he thought back to the night before last, the battle the previous day, the vision of his father’s battle, and…

…Mikage-san.

She was sleeping at the moment.

The development department was trying to wake her, but she would no longer evolve once she did.

However…

“Why does the world have to evolve *to keep us from losing interest in it*? Doesn’t that make the world a slave to its audience? What matters is for both sides to work to make sure they won’t lose interest in each other no matter what might happen.”

He took a breath.

“You need to be able to think you’d never get tired of sleeping alongside the other person.”

Hiba looked to the two stones in front of him.

“Evolution is only one way of changing. Because we’re seeing, hearing, and touching so much, talking about those things, asking about them, doing them together, thinking about really perverted things, and staying in motion the entire time, we have a word for the occasional spots of boredom: a holiday.”

“I noticed something odd mixed in there, but it would seem you know fairly well how to keep things interesting.”

“Yes. After all,” he declared with a smile, “Even if you’ve seen her naked countless times, it still seems fresh when you peep.”

His crotch was hit twice from the front, once from below, and once from behind.

He regained his previous serious expression but with his eyes opened wide, grabbed onto the desk, and trembled.

“A-automated crotch shots? And I feel like they’re focusing more and more on that area!”

“Why are your jokes always so focused on physical comedy?”

“I wasn’t actually trying to make a joke… B-but I feel kind of happy that you think it’s funny…”

Hiba breathed in, gathered strength in his stomach, and scolded his body that was ready to collapse.

However, he heard a voice from the representative seats to his right.

“C’mon, Kashima, why not tape that? Look at how he’s twitching. This would be some rare footage.”

“No. I’d rather not. …It’s too pathetic.”

I-I really don’t like that kind of consideration, he thought with sweat pouring down his face.

…Honestly, whose fault is this!?

His heart lightened a bit when he gave the punchline, *It’s my own fault.*

And so he raised his trembling body.

“To sum up what 7th-Gear wants…”

As he spoke his next words, he collapsed onto the desk and then to the floor.

“Let’s all have fun, ge…l…ge…”

●

When Hiba was carried out on a stretcher, Ooki went with him.

The library and the infirmary were connected by a concept space, but just in case, the special duty men carrying the stretcher were disguised in Taka-Akita Academy uniforms.

The men were so large that the standard size of skirt did not even arrive within twenty centimeters of their knees, but Ooki did not call them on it. She assumed it was just their personal preference.

However, Hiba spoke from his doubled-over position on the stretcher.

“Wh-why do I feel like I’m being carried into a nightmare?”

“Well, um, not to worry, Hiba-kun. You did your job.”

Ooki held out a wristwatch which showed fifty-two minutes had passed since the beginning of the afternoon question-and-answer sessions.

He had bought as much time as Sayama had requested during lunch.

“You did your job and everyone else is doing theirs. Heo-san left the library earlier and said she’s continuing her verification of the world’s creation.”

“I see,” he said and closed his eyes in a look of relief.

The apparent leader of the school uniform-wearing men, a Russian man, nodded as Hiba prepared to drift off to sleep.

“You fought well, so it is time for you to rest.”

That’s how men speak with each other, isn’t it? thought Ooki as she saw the infirmary down the corridor.

A large mohawked German man disguised as a female doctor waited for them with crossed arms.

“Leave the rest to me!”

For some reason, Hiba sprang up and tried to run away, but the men restrained him.

They all laughed and grabbed the short boy like a log.

“It won’t hurt! It won’t hurt at all, so don’t worry, boy! I am incredibly skilled!”

“I-it’s not your skills I’m questioning!”

Ooki watched as Hiba was swallowed up by the infirmary.

He should be fine now, she thought.

“They’re the ones that treated his wounds after Tatsumi-san attacked, after all.”

Just as she started back toward the library, an automaton walked up from the other end of the hallway.

Some of the automatons were charged with informing the Gear reservations and foreign UCAT headquarters what was going on. They were currently distributing an extra report to the personnel stationed in different parts of the concept space meeting area made from the school facilities.

“Oh, Ooki-sama. You should return as quickly as you can.”

“Hm? Is 8th-Gear’s session over?”

“It will be soon,” replied the automaton.

She seemed to focus her ears and listened to the other automatons via her shared memories.

“It seems Sayama-sama will provide 8th-Gear with a workplace. A central control system will be created for the Messengers of Wanambi to live in and they will form an ultra-high speed network.”

The Messengers of Wanambi possessed a thought network much like the automatons’ shared memories.

UCAT used the automatons and their shared memories for a lot of high-level control operations, especially management of troops and strategy, but Sayama was attempting to take another step forward by including Wanambi.

The centralized control system itself would be Wanambi’s workplace.

Wanambi was a powerful shared mind and if he spread across the entire world when the concepts were released, Sayama seemed to think they might be able to communicate their thoughts at greater than the speed of light.

“Sayama-sama said that network and its calculation power would be freed up for civilian use when it was not otherwise in use and each individual Messenger of Wanambi would have access to the civilian side.”

“You mean…?”

The Messengers of Wanambi existed on the level of sand, but they would each have access to the network to play around.

UCAT had a recreation room and an arcade. People played on computers and game systems at schools. Each individual person was given that kind of freedom, but the Messengers of Wanambi were different.

However, Sayama was saying they would be given that now.

“They must have been delighted.”

“Yes. They are apparently saying: ‘Wonderful’ ‘Splendid’ ‘Horosho’ ‘Banzai’ ‘Can do it’ ‘Each one’ ‘Individually’ ‘Can play’ ‘Can play!!’ ”

“Oh?” Ooki nodded. “If that plan is realized, the world will become a much livelier place, won’t it?”

“It will,” agreed the automaton. “Take care, Ooki-sama. 8th-Gear’s question-and-answer session will end soon, but that leads into 9th-Gear, 10th-Gear, and Top-Gear’s sessions. …Izumo-sama and Hiba-sama bought Sayama-sama the time he asked for, but…”

“Are you worried?”

The automaton shook her head.

“I do not have the emotion of worry. I simply have some negative predictions.”

“Yeah, I guess you would.”

Ooki sounded carefree, so the automaton looked up at her.

“Are you not worried?”

“No. After all, Hajji-san is sticking to being our enemy.”

She thought back to the conversations she had in UCAT’s underground cafeteria.

“He’s with the people he trusts now and I’m sure the strength of his words as our enemy are what those people need. He’s sure to step forward as the enemy who will lead us to some kind of answer.”

And…

“I’m sure they’ve already realized Sayama-kun is desperately trying to stall for time.”

The automaton’s expression grew entirely blank as Ooki spoke.

“Ooki-sama,” she said. “Will Sayama-sama be okay?”

“I don’t know. What I do know is that they are both trying to reach their answer.”

Ooki took a breath and scratched her head in resignation.

“And both of them will probably use any means necessary to get there.”

●

Back in the library, 8th-Gear’s question-and-answer session came to an end.

Wanambi and the Messengers had agreed to use their communication and calculation power for the coming new world. They said they would see the world through the network they shared with the information people created.

“Play” “We can play” “Let’s play” “Let’s play!”

That was the final answer Wanambi reached.

Once Sf announced the end of that session, Sayama placed his hands on the central desk and sighed without letting anyone else notice.

An hour and two minutes had passed since the afternoon question-and-answer sessions had begun.

…I have sorted through a lot of what I want to say, but I still have a long way to go.

He needed another hour. There was not much hope with 10th since they had already submitted to UCAT, but 9th was Hajji. If Sayama could stretch things out with him, he could probably get the hour he wanted.

He could use that hour to complete his arguments before the Top-Gear question-and-answer session with Mikoku began.

He watched the automatons carry the Messengers of Wanambi back to their seats.

…Once it’s over, I will have Shinjou-kun praise me.

He also wanted to visit the Tamiya house. Now that they had seen the past, he felt they might feel more meaning in visiting the shrine to the Shinjou family in the backyard there.

Shinjou Yukio had never visited it, but they could still send their thoughts to her from there.

“Yes… And I want to flirt with Shinjou-kun.”

After muttering under his breath, he looked up.

Two lights fell on the representative seats. One on Hajji and one on the elderly manager.

Sayama nodded toward them both.

“Now, Hajji-kun. How about we begin 9th-Gear’s Leviathan Road?”

“That’s right. Yes. …Let’s do that.”

Hajji stood up with a bitter smile and, with a rustle of cloth, raised his right hand.

“Moderator.”

A wave of puzzled looks turned toward him.

Sayama however gave him a look of conviction. It was the look one gave an enemy.

Could it be? he briefly thought. *But,* he added.

…Does he have some kind of plan?

As Sayama thought, Hajji turned back toward him.

He was no longer smiling and had a serious look in his eyes.

“Listen. …9th-Gear transfers all of its rights concerning its concepts to Top-Gear. In other words, I want to treat 9th-Gear’s Leviathan Road and Top-Gear’s question-and-answer session as one and the same.”

A moment later, Mikoku stood up, nodded, and spoke to Sf.

“Moderator, as Top-Gear’s substitute negotiator, I appoint Hajji as Top-Gear’s negotiator!”

Everyone grew intensely silent at those shouted words.

“Objection!” yelled Sayama, while distinctly feeling the weight of his wristwatch. “Hajji is a resident of 9th-Gear and not of Top-Gear!”

Sf replied calmly.

“Low-Gear has also appointed substitute representatives from other Gears. I have determined that both 9th-Gear and Top-Gear have consented to placing Mr. Hajji as Top-Gear’s substitute representative.”

Therefore…

“I accept Mr. Hajji as Top-Gear’s representative. …Low-Gear representative, complete 10th-Gear’s question-and-answer session and then complete Top-Gear’s session with Mr. Hajji.”

A swell of gasps filled the room and Sayama saw Hajji’s one eye looking directly at him.

But that was not all.

Someone else stood up. Jord stood to Hajji’s right and also looked to Sayama.

She shrugged, looked at everyone else, looked back at Sayama, looked at Sf, and spoke clearly.

“Let me make one thing clear first: 10th-Gear will not hold a question-and-answer session.”

“Are you refusing to negotiate?” asked Sf.

Jord shook her head.

“10th-Gear was working with UCAT from the beginning. Also, 10th’s Concept Core has taken a liking to this world and we’re all in the reservation. And with all that, we’ve realized something.”

“What is that?”

“We shouldn’t say anything careless. And for that reason, we don’t worry much about what happens outside. Still, if we have anything to say, it’s to not oppose 10th-Gear and to treat our Concept Core with care.”

With that said, Jord turned to Sayama and showed off her teeth in a smile.

“Sorry about this. …Try to focus on dealing with Top-Gear, okay? And without stalling for time negotiating with 10th.”

Sayama remained silent and finally nodded.

He only spoke after looking at his watch.

“Your demands have been noted.”

Here it comes, he thought.

His final hour had been taken from him.

The enemy had used time to their advantage and eliminated the time he needed to confirm the truth and solidify his argument.

They had worn down his time once by showing up in Sakai and now they had done it again.

And so he told himself he could not afford to lose here. But on top of that…

…Interesting!!

This was essentially an unplanned opportunity to test his ability to adlib and put together arguments.

This was the stage to test his skills.

Here, he could not let his guard down and he had to be serious.

Ahead of him, Jord sat in her seat, Mikoku remained sitting, and Hajji was still standing.

The lights only illuminated Hajji and Mikoku and the latter quietly closed her eyes with a white dog next to her.

Without smiling, Hajji brought a hand to his chest and spoke.

“Now, how about we begin?”

He bowed and Sayama opened his mouth.

It was time to speak the words that would settle everything with Top-Gear.

Chapter 32

“What God Sees”

What are you looking to as you think?
The past?
The future?
Or…

●

Shino woke for the third time that day.

The first had been at dawn when she left the Tamiya house and the second had been on Ryouko's back after falling asleep from her wasted effort to reach that hill.

And this third time, she woke after peacefully falling asleep as Ryouko carried her back.

Her mind cleared as she opened her eyes and she could tell she had slept quite soundly.

She was lying on her back and looking up at the ceiling of her usual room.

She wore a yukata and the feel of it on her skin told her Ryouko had put it on her. The obi was tied in a slightly decorative way.

The futon itself was warm, but the intensity of the sunlight shining through the sliding screen told her afternoon had arrived.

An hour or two must have passed since she fell asleep, but even that little time had lightened her mood quite a bit.

…Is that because I cried?

She sat up and felt two gentle weights on the back of her neck.

They were the chains holding her blue philosopher's stone and the cloisonné that Mikoku had given her.

"Right."

She nodded for no real reason and got the rest of the way up.

Her right leg was still weak, so she supported herself on the left side, removed the blanket, placed her hands on the folded blanket, and pulled herself out from under it.

She then heard a slight sound from the ceiling, so she called out to it.

"Is that Yo-chan? Or Ki?"

"No, I am…but a simple housecat."

She heard a meow followed by footsteps leaving through the ceiling.

That would be Ki, she thought while hearing some birds chirping unnaturally in the yard and a whispering voice from the wall.

"I am a lizard, a house-protecting salamander. …So do not call me Tanaka; call me Sa-chan!"

Tanaka's presence soon left.

All the motion and sounds vanished, but one thing was for sure.

…They're all worried about me.

She was a little surprised by that.

"…"

And she gave a troubled smile.

This was a natural smile that not even she understood very well.

Pushed on by the emotion behind that mysterious smile, she stood up, leaned against the wall, and walked toward the sliding door out of the room.

On the way, she looked to the hanger on the wall.

Her left hand was on the wall, so she used her right to grab Mikoku's cloisonné.

"…No."

But she passed below the hanger without doing anything.

"It's fine."

She reached the door.

"Mikoku and I are both fine. I'm sure of it."

She slowly kneeled and slid open the door.

The first thing she had to do was face the others and apologize for worrying them.

…Can I really stay here?

Mikoku had told her not to fight. She had found a place where she could do that, but what would the people here think of what she had done today?

Ryouko had told her she could run away if she wanted to and Shino had her own interpretation of that.

…If I want to go be with Mikoku, I can.

But Mikoku was sure to still be fighting. Sayama and Shinjou showing up before was proof enough of that. Plus, if Shiro was not here, he had to be with Mikoku.

That meant she could not approach Mikoku yet. She understood that and…

"I can't do anything reckless."

She was a little worried. She felt Mikoku was at least partially fighting to secure a place for herself.

…But if she gains that place, will she disappear?

To Mikoku, fighting was a means of securing a place for herself.

If she accomplished that or the fighting ended, Shino felt she might be satisfied that she was no longer needed and then go somewhere else.

So if possible, she wanted to see Mikoku before the fighting ended.

If Mikoku was going to go somewhere else, she wanted to tell her there was a place for her here.

And after thinking through it all that far…

“I’m being overambitious.”

She smiled bitterly, looked ahead, and told herself to worry about herself first.

…I need to apologize to the people here.

With that thought, she looked down the dark hallway.

Only then did she notice the tray in front of her room’s opened door.

It contained a pot of rice, a rice bowl, a soup that would not lose its flavor if it cooled, and a small pot with some solid fuel below it.

…Ryouko said Kouji was making Salisbury steak.

She opened the pot and found a white object garnished with vegetables.

“Tofu Salisbury steak?”

After a while, she laughed quietly.

“Ryouko lost this round. This isn’t very greasy at all.”

She checked the paper on top of the tray.

“Dinner is at five. We can all visit the festival afterwards.”

It was Kouji’s handwriting and the words gave her a small smile, but she slowly bent over.

“…”

Tears suddenly spilled from her eyes as if pushed out.

…Mikoku.

“I’m…going to do my best here.”

She told Mikoku to do her best too, quietly called Hajji, Tatsumi, Alex, and the others’ names, and told them not to leave behind any regrets.

“Someday…I’ll go see you.”

She worked up her resolve and the words slowly escaped into the hallway.

終わりのクロニクル

●

Hajji began the questions and answers in top form.

He had one job: if Sayama was going to speak of the future…

…I will speak of destruction.

So…

…I will take a leisurely pace. While the future rushes ahead, the past catches up at its own pace.

He had a single objective.

…I will say everything I must say.

He would speak to the future as the representative of destruction and the past.

My sister and my revenge mean nothing this time, he thought. *This is not just about me.*

I will think of the people and worlds that were lost and stretch myself even further.

Otherwise, he could not act as Top-Gear's substitute representative.

He crossed his arms in the silence and felt the heat of the fireplace named Sayama.

He had just confirmed a few different pieces of history with the boy and prepared to change the subject.

"I see. So that is what happened in the past. Then…"

This is the prelude, he told himself as he opened his mouth.

"First, let us talk about Top-Gear and Low-Gear's countermeasures against the activation of the negative concepts."

He asked a question.

"Low-Gear is planning to restrain the activated negative concepts by releasing all of the positive concepts, correct? In other words, you plan to strike a balance between positive and negative."

"Precisely. For better or for worse, I believe both positive and negative are necessary."

But Hajji knew Top-Gear had attempted that, failed, and been destroyed.

Everyone else knew it after he revealed it on the night of their attack and Sayama's group had provided a report on Top-Gear's destruction, so even more of the details were known.

That meant it was entirely possible Low-Gear was simply repeating a past mistake.

But Hajji did not mention that. This argument was not about attacking the other side. He felt he instead needed to present the advantages of his own side.

He had already attacked their side on that night, so he had something else to say now.

"Top-Gear plans to use Babel to have the positive and negative concepts annihilate each other before the activation begins in earnest. That will leave the current reproduced concepts in the Gear reservations as the only way for those Gears to live, so their concepts will no longer be ruled by UCAT."

He took a breath.

"And this way, any Gear that does not wish to leave their reservation, need not do so. And if they do wish to, they can take the concepts with them and do so."

Low-Gear's release of the concepts would fill the entire world with the concepts, so the Gear reservations would effectively lose their reason to exist.

That would force them all to leave.

With Top-Gear's method, the concepts would vanish from the world and only exist in the reservations, so they could split between those who wished to stay in the reservation and those who wished to join the outside world.

Which was better: the world or individuals?

They would all be choosing one of those options during the trial and vote that came after the question-and answer session was complete.

Would they choose Low-Gear or Top-Gear?

Hajji looked across them all, looked to Sayama, and spoke.

"Now, I would like to make an oath on this holy meeting. This oath will demonstrate our different standpoints."

●

Automaton #37 had stenographer duty and she recorded Hajji's oath with some notes.

Hajji-sama: "I believe each Gear has reached some kind of conclusion in the Leviathan Road, but it would be hard to say everyone from those Gears has accepted that conclusion. For their sake, I believe we need to make an oath to each other."

Sayama-sama: "I see. So you wish to make it clear which side we stand on?"

Note: Hajji-sama nods.

Hajji-sama: “Yes. Sayama, you have suppressed conflict using the reason you call the Leviathan Road. That is why reason has continued to rule this space as you have reconfirmed those conclusions. …I believe the trial and vote will begin after another recess, but you are attempting to achieve victory there using reason.”

Sayama-sama: “If you stand opposite my position of reason, then with what are you attempting to achieve victory?”

Hajji-sama: “Emotion.”

Note: Hajji-sama raises his right hand.

Hajji-sama: “No one has lost the emotion they felt when they were ruined, when they had lost, or when they lost something precious to them. They are only suppressing that emotion with reason.”

Note: Hajji-sama looks directly at Sayama-sama.

Hajji-sama: “I swear to you!”

Note: Everyone in attendance looks to Hajji-sama.

Hajji-sama: “All conflict begins with reason and emotion and it can be ended with either! So from here on, I will become emotion. I will become the emotions of those who have lost! And I swear on the word ‘judgment’ and on this meeting that I will use any means necessary to fairly oppose reason!”

Note: Sayama-sama raises his left hand in response.

Sayama-sama: “Then I swear on the word ‘testament’ and on this meeting to use reason to fairly oppose emotion!”

Hajji-sama: “Top-Gear wishes to stop the negative concept activation by eliminating all concepts, freeing the Gears from UCAT’s rule, and beginning life in a free new world!”

Sayama-sama: “Low-Gear will release the concepts and create a world where every Gear can live in harmony! And to do that, we will talk of things that once were and…”

Note: Both of them speak at once.

Both: “Let us talk of the future and of the past!”

●

#8 realized she was seeing the true form of this meeting.

…The future and the past. Reason and emotion.

It was a simple idea. When one lost something, was it right to use their reason to endure or was it right to use emotion to cry and refuse to accept it. That was the argument here.

Afterwards, the others would vote for the view they felt was correct and the world would be remade accordingly.

And at that point…

“…”

Oh, no, determined #8.

If an argument could be called a tactic, then a meeting could be called a strategy.

Hajji had likely thoroughly prepared his strategy and tactics over the past month and a half. His previous oath and decision to stand on the side of emotion were not something he could make up on the spot.

He had likely predicted that the discussions with the Gears would end like this.

…But Sayama-sama is different.

She had heard that he had been thinking about holding a meeting like this, but he had only learned of Shinjou Yukio’s past the day before.

And his time to think during the meeting had been drastically reduced.

He knew what he had to do, but he had been deprived of a chance to do it.

…Sayama-sama.

Just as #8 looked to the back Sayama’s suit, she heard Hajji’s calm voice.

“Now, how about we prepare to talk about the destruction of the past?”

Meaning…

“I am saying we can complete what you have called Top-Gear’s Leviathan Road. I can’t have everyone thinking they will gain something by choosing Low-Gear.”

When she heard that, #8 realized Hajji was beginning his “attack”.

●

Moira 1st listened to and watched Hajji from the audience seats.

Her shared memory was full of life as the thoughts of so many fellow automatons moved about.

…The ones that joined Low-Gear are growing cautious.

They were cautious of Hajji because they viewed him as Sayama's enemy. Some of them had apparently been hijacked during the attack a month and a half prior, so she could not blame them.

But, she thought as Moira 3rd turned her way while licking a lollipop from a festival stand.

The smaller girl was wrinkling her brow a little.

"Big sister, everyone's thoughts are getting kind of dangerous, aren't they?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well," said Moira 3rd. "That Hajji guy's heartrate and body temperature are really stable. …He isn't excited. In fact, Sayama's are less stable because of his exhaustion and impatience. Also…"

A quiet voice from beyond Moira 3rd continued for her.

It was Moira 2nd's scolding voice.

"He is not using emotion when he speaks of emotion. He is only the representative. …He seems to have used up and cast aside the arguments and grudge he showed during the attack on UCAT."

In that case, thought Moira 1st as she saw Hajji raise his right hand and open his mouth.

"We on the side of emotion, Top-Gear, promise the following if we win."

He pointed toward the heavens.

"First, we will punish all primary UCAT personnel, the people of Top-Gear will be given most of the leading positions, and this world will be protected by the trustworthy top point that is Top-Gear."

But…

"But I know what you are thinking: if you do that, you will lose the rights that UCAT promised you during the Leviathan Road."

Moira 1st heard Hajji continue with the word "so".

They all listened as Top-Gear spoke of a scenario where the Leviathan Road was done away with.

…*What will they do?*

Hajji swung down his right hand and answered her unspoken question.

"We will allow UCAT to remain, place it under our control, and continue the Leviathan Road as-is so that you can keep the rights granted to you."

His answer sent a stir through the room.

"…!"

An unpredictable sound that Moira 1st concluded was surprise filled the shared memories of the Moira-class automatons.

It was likely made up of every single model's thoughts which likely mirrored those of the surrounding people.

"He's hijacking the Leviathan Road!"

A shout of protest arrived over their shared memories, but…

"Wait!"

Moira 1st heard #8 who sat calmly next to the moderator's seat.

After requesting that they stop, she slowly spoke.

"Why are you so angry? Whether he is hijacking it or not is a problem for Top-Gear and Low-Gear. What we receive remains the same, so I have determined this is irrelevant to the other Gears."

That's true, agreed Moira 1st without releasing the thought to her shared memories.

Hajji's words had contained a certain meaning.

…*He has eliminated any advantage given by the Leviathan Road.*

The greatest deciding factor for the advantages and disadvantages of choosing Low-Gear or Top-Gear had been the Leviathan Road, but Top-Gear had eliminated that factor by saying they would honor it.

The only factors remaining were Low-Gear's reason and Top-Gear's emotion.

But, thought Moira 1st.

…*In that case, where is the gap between Top-Gear and Low-Gear?*

As if to answer her, Hajji raised his right hand again and pointed at Sayama.

"There is one point of difference between Low-Gear and Top-Gear: the nature of the ruler."

He took a breath.

"Low-Gear is a destroyer. You used destruction for your own ends and now, as villains, you tell us to give up on the past and face the future. On the other hand…"

Sayama continued for Hajji.

"Top-Gear will not forget the destruction and will weep with the survivors, but you will set this world in motion after setting up leaders from the top inheritors. …Isn't that right?"

Moira 1st saw Hajji nod.

…*What is with this discussion?*

It seemed to her that they were trying to understand each other. By understanding their opponent's position, they could oppose them more effectively.

But Moira 1st realized the flow of conversation always began with Top-Gear's words.

It was as if Hajji were rolling up the groundwork that Sayama rolled out during the question-and-answer sessions.

Or to put it another way…

"Top-Gear is trying to swallow up Low-Gear."

●

Hiba sprang up from the infirmary bed.

He was listening to Hajji speak over the cellphone being used as a transmitter.

…This is bad!

After he sat up and threw off the blanket, he heard more from the phone.

It was Sayama replying to Hajji.

"Hajji-kun, the Leviathan Road we have agreed to was based on the assumption that the concepts would be released. If you eliminate them instead, I believe it would be impossible to continue with the agreements we reached."

That's right, thought Hiba, but then he heard Hajji's calm voice.

"Sayama, there is a simple answer to that. If our methods conflict with the continuation of the Leviathan Road's agreements…"

He could be heard taking a breath.

"As the losers, you will have to make the necessary adjustments. You must ensure that everything is inherited by the new world."

"…!?"

"You have no right to reject this idea, do you? Yes, if you are wrong, then you only need to make yourself right. That is what Shinjou told me in UCAT, so that is all you need to do. There is no problem."

…This is bad.

Hiba felt like everything they had done was being flipped over like in a game of Othello.

They had filled the board with their pieces, but all at once…

…He's flipped them all over.

He then realized how Hajji was going to use the position of emotion to hold back the Leviathan Road that came from reason.

In other words, he knew what Hajji's tactic at this meeting was.

"By swallowing up the Leviathan Road, he's crushing his opponent's reason without having to use reason himself!"

Hiba tried to get out of the bed. He knew there was nothing he could do, but he still wanted to go there.

But…

"Calm down, Hiba."

He heard a voice from another simple white bed and saw someone sitting cross-legged on it.

"Izumo-san! A-are your injuries okay!?"

"Yeah, but what were you moaning about in your sleep? You were holding your crotch, twisting around, and shouting 'Balls! I've had enough balls!' Are you gay or something? Stay back. I don't even want to hear your voice."

"D-don't say that when you're the one that started the conversation!"

"I gradually realized it after I'd already started the conversation."

Hiba noticed Izumo was reading something.

"H-how can you read when all this important stuff is happening!?"

"There's nothing I could do to help, so I thought I would rest until it was an absolute emergency and that German disguised as a female doctor left this European magazine here."

"All of a sudden, I want to read too. Can I?"

"Stay back, you creep. If you're gay, aren't the contents of your own pants enough for you?"

"Y-you're really prejudiced, you know that!?"

Suddenly, Kazami's voice came from the phone.

"What are you two doing?"

"Oh, K-Kazami-san!? I-I was, um, well…"

"Don't worry, Hiba. Calm down. …I'll go easy on you."

"Wait, wait. You mean you won't go easy on me, Chisato? I can't believe this."

"I get the feeling neither of you have a very high opinion of me!"

They both told Hiba to shut up, so he did.

He then heard Kazami's voice again.

"Things are heating up quite a bit in here, so if you're thinking of heading over, you probably should. It's at least interesting to watch."

"Eh?" asked Hiba just as Hajji's calm voice came from the phone.

"Let us begin."

Just as he said, the questioning began.

And it began with the emotion of losing something precious.

●

As Hajji began to speak, a girl gulped in Low-Gear's waiting room.

She spoke in a daze as she stared at the twelve spheres displayed on her laptop's screen.

"It can't be…"

Behind her, a black-haired girl in a white armored uniform turned around, stood up, and walked over.

"Did you find the answer, Heo?"

"Well, uh… This method was really just a crazy idea I had, but…"

Heo brought a hand to her cheek.

Her face had gone pale and she audibly gulped before looking up at the black-haired girl standing next to her.

"B-but this is the only way to explain something I'd found odd."

"Something you'd found odd? What's that?"

"Well." Heo looked the other girl in the eye. "It's Georgius, Shinjou. That's the key to it all."

She began by saying "look" and hit a key to begin the simulation.

…*This has to be the right answer.*

The world creation simulation restarted and the window filled with black.

As they saw what appeared there and watched the beginning of the world, Heo and Shinjou gave contrasting reactions.

Heo closed her eyes as if telling herself something, while Shinjou…

"Is this…!?"

That's right, thought Heo as she nodded and asked a question.

"Do you believe in god?"

Chapter 33

“He who Speaks of Pain”

It exists within pain
So even as they ache
People can reach out

●

According to the library's clock, it was 2:30 PM.

An hour and a half had passed since the afternoon question-and-answer sessions had begun.

It was a good time for a short recess.

However, no one in the audience seats stood, spoke, or even stirred. Only Hajji's calm voice filled the meeting room.

He spoke as everyone watched.

"Now, let us reconfirm the destructive sins Low-Gear committed against Top-Gear."

Eventually, he received a reply.

At the bottom of the library, Sayama added in his own words.

"Then you can hear my opinion while we are at it."

"Of course," expressionlessly replied Hajji "First."

Everyone listened as he began his previous list of seven sins.

"What do you have to say about Low-Gear's existence causing the time of destruction?"

And Sayama answered. He gave the answer he had likely already prepared in his heart.

"About that one…"

Everyone listened.

"If you can call the world's creation a sin, then wouldn't the greatest sinner be god, who is ranked just below me? It would be one thing if it was something we could have changed, but this was unavoidable, wasn't it? There is no room for redemption here, so why even talk about it as a sin?"

"I see," said Hajji.

He seemed to be aware how utterly silent the audience was because he did not raise his voice even as he suddenly continued on.

"Then what about the second sin, killing your neighbors by destroying the ten Gears?"

The next question brought about even greater silence.

Sayama frowned and asked the very question that had brought on that silence.

"Does this mean you accepted my answer concerning the first sin?"

Despite the question, Hajji remained expressionless and said something else.

"Can we move on?"

What did that question mean in relation to Sayama's doubts?

No one knew and Hajji simply repeated himself.

"Are you listening? I asked about the sin of killing your neighbors."

After being asked again, Sayama finally nodded and gave an expressionless answer.

"That has already been settled with the ones involved. There is no need for an unrelated Gear to speak out about it now."

"I see," everyone heard Hajji say.

And without altering his stance, he immediately asked the next question.

"Then what about the third sin, killing your parent by destroying Top-Gear?"

Sayama's eyebrows moved slightly when the man continued to the third question without adding anything to the previous one.

However, he slowly and cautiously answered that third question.

"I plan to go over the facts of that issue in a moment."

Everyone once more heard Hajji say, "I see."

And that answer filled the audience with some slight movement.

That movement was known as unrest.

Hajji had claimed he would answer Sayama's reason using emotion.

However, he had said nothing about any of the three answers he had received, even though Sayama's last answer had not been an answer at all.

Nevertheless, Hajji said nothing more. Enough people found this unusual that a slight stir was running through them.

What was going on?

However, Hajji asked his next question as if to drown out that slight noise.

"Then what about the fourth sin, the killing of your other selves?"

"I think we should lament that one side was lost as a result of our battle."

Sayama gave a purely dutiful answer, but…

"I see."

Hajji let it slide again.

Everyone watching over the meeting reacted further.

“…?”

Their doubts and suspicions grew.

They had assumed Hajji would speak from the side of emotion about was lost, yet he was letting Sayama’s answers go with no further comment.

Once again, they wondered what was going on.

And then they realized Sayama’s brow was ever so slightly furrowed as he faced Hajji.

That was proof that he too had assumed his answers would receive some kind of argument.

He had assumed a debate between reason and emotion would begin.

But Hajji was asking nothing more of him.

Just as everyone wondered why, Hajji spoke again.

“Then what about the fifth sin, bringing a disaster to your own world?”

Sayama thought for a few seconds, and…

“The residual effects of Top-Gear’s destruction were unavoidable and I believe the damage was kept to a minimum by sending Noah into the void. As such,” he said, “I feel Low-Gear did nothing wrong there.”

Everyone could tell his use of the word “feel” was an invitation.

Because they had done the best they could, he did not “feel” anything wrong with what they had lost.

That was an unforgivable statement from the standpoint of emotion.

Nevertheless…

“I see.”

Hajji let even that go.

Everyone held their breaths at Hajji’s confounding responses.

How did he want this question-and-answer session to go?

And as they all watched him, Hajji spoke lightly as if trying to hurry the topic along.

“Then what about the sixth sin, covering it all up to escape responsibility?”

Sayama gave a direct answer.

He seemed to be saying he felt a need to answer no matter what Hajji might be hiding.

“Listen. We too were affected by our predecessors’ secrecy. That is how we managed to complete our negotiations while looking to the future. …That is all there is to it.”

He was essentially stubbornly refusing to justify it, but…

“I see. Then…”

Sure enough, Hajji asked nothing of emotion and moved on.

“What about the seventh sin, attempting to rule the world while hiding your sins?”

“To rule the world? I believe we were negotiating to stand on equal footing with the other Gears, but do you see it differently?”

He answered the question with a question of his own, but Hajji responded no differently.

“I see.”

When they heard that answer, everyone had a feeling they knew what was coming.

Was even the judgment of those seven sins part of the “emotion of what was lost” that Hajji spoke of?

And to prove them right, he gave Sayama a nod of understanding and spoke.

“Reason is a troublesome thing, Sayama. If you try to use reason to answer even a tiny question produced by emotion, you can only provide a specific means of resolving the problem.”

He crossed his arms.

“And reason is a sad thing. After all, even if you answer each individual question and then try to solve each of the problems, it does not change the fact that Low-Gear destroyed the other Gears.”

Everyone heard Sayama respond.

“I am aware of that. That is the entire point of the Leviathan Road. It allows us to move toward a resolution without letting our emotions get the better of us.”

“Is that so?” asked Hajji while scratching his head. “Is that so? Then there is one problem I would like for you to resolve.”

Hajji looked up and everyone stiffened.

It was coming.

The emotion was coming.

This was the emotion everyone felt when they lost something.

Even the judgment of the seven sins had come from this, so they were but the opening act.

He was about to speak of a means to resolve that emotion.

As they all wondered what that could be, they saw motion.

The girl sitting next to Hajji nodded with her arms crossed and eyes closed.

Pushed on by her nod, Hajji opened his mouth.

●

“Reaching a resolution is the logic of those who survived, so I will respond to that with the logic of those who died.”

This was Top-Gear’s demand.

“This is the one and only way to resolve the emotion of losing something precious. This is something that cannot be resolved with emotion, so I ask that you resolve it with reason, Sayama.”

Hajji asked for just one thing.

“Please return everything that we lost.”

In the depths of the silence and stillness, Hajji clearly asked for what emotion demanded.

As Top-Gear’s substitute representative he presented his demand to Low-Gear’s representative. This was Top-Gear’s demand for the Leviathan Road.

終わりのクロニクル

“Return everything and everyone that was lost or that died.”

He took a breath.

“Yes, we do not need anything other than that.”

He closed his eyes.

“We simply want it back. If you do that, we will have no more reason for hard feelings. So…”

He placed his hands on his desk and bowed deeply toward Sayama.

“Could you please return everything that you have taken from us?”

●

Kazami clenched her teeth.

…Now he’s done it!!

He was making an attack of pure emotion.

There was no way of bringing the dead back to life. Everyone knew that.

…But it’s what everyone wants. They want their loss to have never happened!

Kazami understood this all too well after her tears a month and a half ago.

The words “what if” were powerful.

Unattainable hope hid behind them.

And as Kazami watched, Hajji said more with his head still bowed.

“What if? What if our lands and skies still remained?”

He used them.

“What if? What if the birds and beasts still lived?”

He used them.

“What if? What if those precious people still lived?”

What if?

“What if we still held all the misunderstandings, things we wanted to say, things we wanted to do, and everything else that we only now realize were so important?”

As soon as Hajji straightened up, Sayama’s voice rang out.

“Those are words of retreat that deny all of the inherited words and inherited people!”

“Then yours are words of attack that can only be spoken by those who can still move ahead.”

Hajji calmly answered Sayama’s shout.

“Listen.”

He breathed in and let Sayama’s shouting go without comment. He seemed to say there was no need to speak in such a disgraceful manner here.

“What if?”

Here it comes, realized Kazami.

This was what lay on the opposite end of a demand. If that demand was not accepted, he would ask for…

…Compensation!

The compensation brought about by the greatest emotion would be a resolution created by the greatest reason.

A moment later, Hajji gave his true demand.

“Here is what Top-Gear demands. The other Gears have lost everything, so if Low-Gear cannot return anything to them, you must hand over this entire Gear as a substitution. …That is Top-Gear’s demand for the Leviathan Road.”

His words filled the library and the air grew clear.

Almost everyone looked to Sayama, but Kazami noticed someone who reacted differently.

In the moderator’s seat, Sf still looked out across the entire room.

“Low-Gear representative, give your answer.”

“Very well.”

Kazami listened as Sayama puffed out his chest and gave a succinct answer.

“That is impossible, you fool.”

●

Hajji looked to Sayama without even frowning.

“Impossible?”

Sayama nodded.

“Indeed it is,” he began. “Listen. Why are you making such a big deal about demanding something we could never provide? No one could do that. If you can bring back the dead, then I will attempt to answer your ‘what ifs’. But you cannot and this is not something that can be replaced by a substitute. That is why… Yes, that is why we have chosen to clear it all away by letting it be inherited by the next generation.”

He took a breath.

“Emotion is a troublesome thing, Hajji-kun. And it is a sad thing.”

“How is it sad?”

Sayama nodded and spoke as if working to understand his opponent.

“Do you have anyone to inherit who you are once you die?”

“…”

“It would make no sense if you did. After all, you have told the people you leave behind to forever regret your death.” Sayama breathed out. “That is a sad thing. Have you never heard of the Bon Festival system? How about Easter, or memorial services, or graves, or memorial portraits, or memorial tablets, or prayers to your ancestors, or thinking of the other side of the Sanzu River, or the sorrowful day of the number seven and its multiple? …They are all a way of reconfirming what was lost, keeping count, and continuing on.”

Hajji heard Sayama continue and saw him place his right hand on his chest.

“But you are telling us not to keep count of how much time has passed.”

“I see,” said Hajji. “Then,” he began.

He went on to ask a question that seemed perfectly natural to him. From his emotional standpoint, he felt the need to ask this of the boy who faced him from a reasoning standpoint.

“Sayama, does your reason treat the dead as a number?”

This was his question.

Hajji remembered those who had been lost. He could not treat them as mere numbers.

But what about Sayama? he wondered with a bitter smile in his heart. He seemed to be hoping Sayama would be in the same place as him.

But Sayama did not immediately respond.

It’s coming, he realized. *He’s going to try something now.*

…Bring it on.

No matter what answer the boy gave, he would reply with emotion.

Soon, Sayama slowly opened his mouth and held his hand to the left side of his chest.

“It is true that reason would treat the dead as a number and that is what I will do. But…”

He lowered the ends of his eyebrows, smiled, and stared directly at Hajji.

“But then why do I feel this pain?”

●

Sayama inhaled.

With that one breath, he attempted to control the binding pain filling his body.

Memories of his parents filled the back of his mind. He had remembered them in order to count two of the dead as a number.

And as close as those dead were to him, he did count them as a number.

Still, he ached.

Why is that? he wondered.

Was it because his mother had sacrificed herself to save his life?

When he asked why his mother had done that, he found an answer.

“I asked why I feel this pain when I use reason to think about this, but the answer is simple. …My parents and my grandfather are telling me not to feel this pain forever.”

And…

“This pain is what brought me here. Do you understand what I mean?”

He spoke to Hajji who was trying to listen to him.

“Why do I still try to use reason even as I ache? Let me answer that as it relates to another story: the truth of Top-Gear’s destruction.”

●

Brunhild listened to Sayama.

“I will now provide Low-Gear’s view of Top-Gear’s destruction. And let me provide the conclusion up front: Top-Gear’s destruction was not a one-sided attack; it was the result of many people’s pains.”

This meant one thing.

He was going to prove that Top-Gear’s destruction had not been caused by Low-Gear’s invasion.

…He’s going to eliminate the advantage Top-Gear has as the victim of destruction?

Brunhild frowned just as Hajji spoke.

As usual, it was a quiet almost suppressed voice.

“Are you trying to justify your destruction of Top-Gear?”

●

Kashima listened as Sayama ignored Hajji, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth.

“Those of you who have read the report likely have a few questions. I assume the greatest of those is why Shinjou Yukio did not actively work on creating the negative concepts after moving to Top-Gear. And why she failed to make them once she did try.”

Someone replied.

It was of course Hajji and, as if forming a duet with the boy, he filled in what Sayama had left unsaid.

“That is because your father took revenge. He altered the negative concept data he sent to Shinjou Yukio so that they would activate once made.”

Kashima nodded.

The report contained evidence to support that view of the past. Sayama Asagi himself had said as much before Low-Gear had begun their attack.

Kashima thought that was proof enough that Low-Gear had destroyed Top-Gear.

●

But Miyako listened to what Sayama expressionlessly said with his eyes closed.

“Shinjou Yukio was able to use the incomplete positive concepts to calculate out the missing portion. Why was someone that skilled unable to accurately create the negative concepts in a world containing the opposite example that were the positive concepts? Was she really misled by the data? It is quite the mystery. And Shinjou Yukio left behind another mystery.”

He took a breath.

“She said this world has three things that Top-Gear does not.”

Yeah, thought Miyako. *I heard about that from Wanambi.*

So she knew what Sayama was about to say.

Under her breath, she said exactly what Sayama did and paid no heed to Gyes who turned toward her.

“Babel, the Biblical mythology, and one other.”

But Miyako did not know the rest.

Oh, she thought. *Are you here to find that out?*

●

The plant creature listened to Sayama’s voice which seemed to reverberate in its thoughts.

“But what is the final one? Shinjou Yukio, the woman so closely involved with Top-Gear’s destruction, was pursuing that mystery.”

“Shinjou?”

Sayama seemed to reply to the creature.

“Yes. That is Shinjou-kun’s mother who defected to Top-Gear. And she had found the answer to that mystery.”

●

From 5th-Gear’s representative seat, Harakawa listened to Sayama while transmitting the voices to Heo using his cellphone.

Keep talking, villain, he thought.

“So what is the final thing that only Low-Gear has?” asked Sayama. “The answer is…Shinjou-kun.”

●

Izumo listened while leaving the infirmary with Hiba.

“I don’t really get it, but if that idiot isn’t just praising his girlfriend again, he’d better explain himself.”

Sayama could not hear his voice or the bitter smile it contained, but the boy almost seemed to answer him.

“If this world has a concept unique to itself, what do you think it is?”

Hiba asked about that while tilting his head and walking with his legs turned inward.

“Does this negative Gear really have a concept?”

Izumo was not the one to answer him; it was Sayama over the cellphone.

“Had you never thought about it? Anyone from Low-Gear had to have wondered this at least once after learning of the Concept War: how can this world exist with nothing but negative concepts?”

And…

“How can Low-Gear continue to exist without losing its balance even after the positive concepts were brought here?”

Hiba realized what Sayama was trying to say.

“Is that because Low-Gear has some kind of special concept?”

Sayama’s voice replied.

“Yes. Negative concepts can exist all on their own under the effects of this concept. In fact, it is thanks to this concept that negative concepts, positive concepts, and anything else are allowed in this world.”

●

Wanambi listened to the answer of the riddle that Shinjou Yukio had given him more than a decade ago.

Sayama was giving that answer in its most accurate form.

“And under the effects of this concept, even the god-like act of creating concepts becomes possible. …That is what Low-Gear alone has. It is a concept that allows for positive, negative, creation, and anything else.”

He declared its identity.

“It is…”

He took a breath.

“The concept of contradiction allowance.”

●

Hajji listened as Sayama raised just his left forearm.

“Why did Shinjou Yukio move to Top-Gear? That is simple. Because thanks to the contradiction allowance concept, the normally impossible concept creation was possible in Low-Gear.”

He listened to Sayama’s words.

He accepted them as a reply to the argument he had made during his attack on UCAT.

He silently listened to the boy’s words.

…I see.

So this is his answer, he thought. Sayama felt pain while using reason, so he had chosen a way to suppress that pain.

…To swallow up the pain, he is attempting to learn and accept everything.

Sayama was doing nothing more than reasoning his way through the issue, but Hajji knew what the boy was trying to do.

This reasoning would allow him to accept emotion.

So…

…Doesn’t that make you the bearer of emotion!?

Even as he had that thought, Hajji continued to listen to Sayama.

“Therefore, Shinjou Yukio realized her existence would be a deciding factor for Low-Gear. Yet if she revealed the existence of the contradiction allowance concept, who knows what Low-Gear’s hawks would try to use it to create. So she kept it a secret, altered her concept creation theory, and defected to Top-Gear.”

Why defect? silently asked Hajji.

As if to answer him, Sayama looked his way and gave a small nod.

“Top-Gear had no contradiction allowance concept, so concept creation was impossible there no matter how much they struggled. Doing so would be playing god, so it was only possible in a world that allowed for anything. Therefore,” he said again. “It may seem backwards, but she would not be a deciding for Top-Gear if she sided with them. And with no knowledge

of the contradiction allowance concept, Low-Gear concluded that they could no longer create concepts since she had left and altered her theory.”

He breathed in and chose his words carefully.

“But Top-Gear asked her to create the negative concepts there, even though doing so was impossible. And if they created them regardless,” he said. “They would be unstable negative concepts that would inevitably activate.”

That statement contained a certain truth, so Hajji opened his mouth and asked for confirmation.

“Then is this what you are trying to say? Top-Gear was destroyed because they had Shinjou Yukio create the negative concepts without knowing the truth?”

However, Sayama did not nod in agreement.

He simply paused for a moment to look at Hajji.

“In the past we saw in Sakai, Top-Gear’s Shinjou Yukio had realized the truth about the contradiction allowance concept. After all, he seemed to know why his other self was refusing to create the concepts there. But he wanted to do his very best despite knowing that,” said Sayama. “As for Low-Gear, I think my father had also realized that truth. And when the two Shinjous decided to create the negative concepts, my father sent them the modified negative concept data. …Why do you think he did that?”

Hajji thought on that.

But…

“I would like to hear what you think, Sayama.”

Hajji watched as Sayama held his chest with his right hand.

His shirt could be seen twisting below his suit’s collar as he grasped the pain in his chest.

“My father had a single reason for sending them the modified data despite knowing the whole truth. If the worst case scenario played out, he wanted to take all responsibility for Top-Gear’s destruction onto himself rather than letting it fall on Top-Gear.”

After all…

“The surname Sayama indicates a villain.”

●

Jord listened to Hajji speak.

“Then are you saying Top-Gear destroyed itself?”

“I do not know.”

Sayama spoke clearly and Jord saw strength in his raised left arm.

“In the past we saw, Top-Gear was already attempting to create the negative concepts without Shinjou Yukio. And at that stage, she finally decided to help. …I am nearly certain that she first insisted that it would be impossible. But,” he said. “The higher ups most likely ordered both Shinjous to create the negative concepts regardless.”

“Why would they insist on creating the concepts after knowing it is impossible?”

Jord noticed something off about the tone of Hajji’s question.

It sounded like the man wanted to reveal the truth.

…Don’t tell me…

A possibility came to her mind: did he actually just want to know the truth about Top-Gear’s destruction?

She looked to Hajji and his expression.

He was staring straight ahead at Sayama.

She started to say something when she saw it.

“…”

But she stopped.

Instead, she sighed and watched the man continue to stare at the boy.

He asked the boy a question while seeming to enjoy the questioning.

“Why did the two Shinjous try to create the concepts in Top-Gear despite knowing they could not? And why did your father try to take on all of the responsibility?”

Jord saw Hajji cross his arms and give an exaggerated tilt of the head.

“Why did one world choose self-destruction and the other choose to bear all responsibility?”

●

With her eyes closed, Mikoku listened to her other self.

“Hajji-kun, what kind of Gear was Top-Gear when you were there?”

Yes, she thought before thinking exactly what Sayama said next.

“Was it an appropriate Gear to lead an alliance of every Gear?”

If it was, she thought.

“Top-Gear would have tried to fulfill its responsibilities. Meaning…”

Mikoku took a breath just as Sayama did.

“They may have been unable to create the concepts, but as the Gear to lead all others, they had to create a place for Low-Gear.”

So, thought Mikoku while squeezing her eyes more tightly shut and holding a hand to her chest.

“My father responded in kind. If they failed, he made sure Low-Gear would bear the responsibility for their destruction. …After all, Top-Gear was only lost because it attempted to prepare a place for Low-Gear.”

And Mikoku heard Hajji slowly breathe in and then speak.

“Is this what you are trying to say, Sayama? Top-Gear tried to restrain the activating negative concepts using the positive concepts held inside Noah, but Low-Gear determined that would never work and instead chose to eliminate Noah?”

“Yes. That is what led to that battle in Osaka. The people of Top-Gear attempted to preserve their Gear’s existence, but the people of Low-Gear attempted to prevent the negative concepts from reaching their Gear. …They were both trying to protect what they held dear.”

“I see,” said Hajji.

Mikoku noticed a satisfied note to Hajji’s tone.

…Father?

But her doubt did not continue. She felt she should not delve into Hajji’s thoughts.

At the same time, she once more wondered how she should settle all of this.

And with her eyes still closed, she heard Hajji’s voice.

After going out of his way to make himself Sayama’s enemy, he spoke his honest thoughts.

“Sayama, you have reasoned through this quite well and I can accept quite a lot of it. But,” he said, “Where is the proof? I understand you deduced this from the past you saw in dreams and the documents you have found, but as your enemy, I require proof. Proof is needed to convince emotion.”

“Well…” trailed off Sayama.

He finally continued with a bitter tone.

“There is not yet any definitive proof.”

Mikoku heard a certain sound.

It was Hajji gulping.

“That is not good enough,” he said. “And either way, it does not change the fact that Top-Gear was destroyed. If Low-Gear eliminated Noah, then it is possible to say you destroyed Top-Gear which was supported by the positive concepts contained within the ship.”

“So the crime of destroying Top-Gear, the mother of all Gears, is that great, is it?”

“It is.” Hajji agreed. “With Top-Gear, every Gear could live together without releasing the concepts. …The creation of the world tells us as much. Top-Gear is the greatest of all Gears and the rebirth of the mother element.”

“So proof is needed to overturn it all.”

“Yes.”

For some reason, Mikoku noticed a hint of disappointment in Hajji’s voice.

“Without proof, everything you have said means nothing.”

At that point, Mikoku was able to guess at something.

And if she was right, the debate would end here or someone would stop it.

And a moment later, she heard a girl’s voice from the library entrance.

“Objection!”

●

Everyone turned toward the library entrance in surprise.

A girl stood there with a laptop.

Heo stood petrified and her face was completely pale.

She was clearly trembling with nerves and fear of something.

But her eyebrows rose and her footsteps rang through the room.

She passed the counter, passed the representative seats, ignored Sf silently aiming her heavy machineguns to keep the girl from interrupting, came to a stop between Sayama and Hajji, and turned toward Sf.

“I object to what Top-Gear’s substitute negotiator just said.”

“What is your objection?”

“Well,” she said while pulling out her cellphone. “I summoned Thunder Fellow and he’s sending the data over while reconfirming my findings. I’ll explain while we look at that. It’s kind of hard to say, but, um…”

She took a breath to eliminate her hesitation and then spoke clearly.

“There is a way for the twelve worlds to be created other than the theory given by Hajji.”

●

Heo handed her laptop to a nearby automaton and told her to project its video onto the counter’s whiteboard.

“Top-Gear was destroyed by the negative concepts running out of control.”

Everyone knew that. She saw Diana nod from the audience seats and hold up the report in her hand.

She felt like her teacher was telling her it was okay, which helped further eliminate her hesitation.

“But the negative concepts overtook Top-Gear too quickly, so Low-Gear made use of a certain plan. They…used a reverse seal to send Noah into the void.”

“And? Hm? What about it?”

She heard Hajji’s voice behind her.

“That is why Low-Gear only suffered the Great Kansai Earthquake, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, that’s right. But doesn’t everyone have a question about that?”

She asked that question.

“What exactly is the void?”

It was…

“It is a place with no time. …It lacks even nothingness.”

Behind Heo, darkness was projected onto the whiteboard.

At the same time, the library’s lights lowered and the dark light on the whiteboard was the only light left.

Heo’s words alone filled the library.

“Not even time has appeared there, so it is the starting point of the world. And…”

She took a breath.

“The starting point of every world is where Noah was sent!”

●

Shinjou breathed out into the waiting room.

Heo had run out of the room, but Thunder Fellow remained where he had broken through the classroom wall.

In Thunder Fellow’s cockpit, Harakawa was checking over Heo’s theory.

…We’ve gotten so busy all of a sudden.

Shinjou was busy putting together an additional report regarding Heo’s theory.

It was short, but Ooki had worked hard to translate it and she was adding the publication data for the citations to increase its credibility.

She was copying over the publication data from Kinugasa Tenkyou’s mythology encyclopedia, which Kazami or Harakawa had handled previously.

She typed it in and then reached Kinugasa Tenkyou’s name.

Suddenly, she noticed something odd about the characters written in the publication data.

“Huh?”

She tilted her head and looked at the publication data of the other encyclopedia volumes.

She checked the second, third, fourth, and then skipped to the eleventh. That was when she realized something.

“Is this…?”

She stood up and ran from the room holding the report she had just printed out.

Ooki shouted after her.

“Wh-what is it, Shinjou-san!? This is the kind of suddenness I expect from Sayama-kun!”

“That is a horrible misunderstanding, but, um, uh… I have something important to take care of!”

She shouted back and ran down the hall toward the first floor and the library.

“I’ve realized something! Something incredibly…incredibly important!”

Chapter 34

“Signature of Reversal”

As if there was a time of happiness
As if to say everything was right
You have gathered everything together and arrived at this evidence

●

In the library, Heo began her explanation of the world's creation.

Ten black spheres had appeared in the projected blackness.

"In '95, Noah was sent from Top-Gear's Osaka and into the emptiness of the void. This created the impossible phenomenon of 'something existing in a place of nothingness', so Noah gained a contradiction concept."

The ten activated negative spheres within Noah attempted to grow.

"Here, the ten positive concepts were reactively purified from the surrounding space. They attempt to restrain the negativity, but they are pushed back by the repulsive force."

After reaching a certain distance from the ten negative spheres, the ten positive spheres began to orbit around the negative ones as if attempting to escape the power pushing them away.

"This allowed them to suppress the negative concepts, but some of the repulsive force remained."

As the ten negative spheres gathered together to form Low-Gear, another Gear began to appear next to it.

This Gear contained ten positive concepts.

"And that force became a mirror image of Low-Gear. This…this is the true identity of Top-Gear. And because Noah formed the foundation of Low-Gear…"

The projected image changed to a map.

It displayed a portion of Japan's Kansai region. Specifically, the Mt. Ikoma region.

"Babel is not a Concept Core storage facility that Top-Gear created in Low-Gear. It is the storage facility for the negative concepts that form the core of the entire world! It is Noah!!"

Heo's voice penetrated the darkness.

At the same time, the lights above her and Hajji reactivated and she gave a shout.

"The world has performed a loop around Noah and Top-Gear is not the mother Gear! That is my objection!"

●

"I see."

Hajji crossed his arms and nodded at Heo's shout.

He then brought a hand to his chin and breathed out.

"An interesting theory. It is true we could view it that way if we use your interpretation of sending Noah into the void." He shrugged. "But, 5th-Gear representative, while I am sure you simply could not bear to watch Low-Gear being criticized, I am sorry to say that your theory is nothing more than an amusing idea."

"If we investigate the interior of Babel, we should find the truth. Babel is sure to accept anyone from Top-Gear and I think Sayama Asagi was let in because Shinjou Yukio added him to Noah's approved list during the battle in Osaka."

"It may have been mere coincidence that he was let in."

Hajji refused to admit it. As their enemy, he insisted they produce the missing evidence.

"And…what about Professor Kinugasa? Why was he allowed inside Babel?"

Everyone fell silent because there was obviously no evidence to explain that.

However, Hajji heard Heo's resolute voice from directly ahead.

"I-I don't know about him. But I do have proof that Noah was sent into the past."

When he heard that, Hajji's expression changed to include some faint joy.

…Well done.

He hurriedly covered his mouth.

…As their enemy, I can't be making an expression like this.

"And…and what is that? Are you claiming to have seen the creation of the world?"

Someone answered him, but it was not Heo.

The boy standing beyond her, Sayama, made a guess of his own.

Hajji heard the enemy display his key to the truth.

"Could you mean… Heo-kun, is it Georgius?"

"Yes," said the girl with a nod.

She turned toward Sayama and gave him an urging and pleading look, so a light shined on him as well and he opened his mouth.

He brought a hand to his chin to think about what he should say. After a short pause, he glanced briefly toward Hajji and they seemed to confirm something with each other.

“Listen. After the battle with Top-Gear, my mother had gained one half of Georgius, but she lacked the other half. Why, you ask?”

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder and toward the entrance to the preparation room.

“Because it is in there. Strange, isn’t it? After all, Georgius should be a pair, but it exists across two different eras.”

“Couldn’t you just assume the two halves were made separately in two different eras and two different places?”

“That is one way of viewing it, but there is another way.”

Sayama answered Hajji’s question as if they were solving Heo’s puzzle together.

“When Noah was sent to the void, my father gave the authoritative decree from the center of the barrier. The fall into the void began from the center and grew shallower toward the outer edges. So perhaps the areas toward the edges of the barrier never reached an absolute void and perhaps they were mostly thrown into the intervening time and gathered there,” said Sayama. “Noah initially fell somewhere other than Top-Gear – namely, Low-Gear – and then fell to the zero-point of time as something that ‘did not exist’. Artifacts have been found around the world in eras where they do not belong, so perhaps that phenomenon was the cause. And what if one of Georgius’s halves was caught in the explosion of the barrier?”

“Then, Sayama, is this what you are saying? It ended up in the past and was found by Kinugasa Tenkyou?”

Hajji crossed his arms and checked to see if Sayama’s claims were the truth.

“Then let me say this: Unfortunately, that is still not definitive proof.”

“Not definitive?”

“That’s right.” Hajji looked to Sayama. “What proof do you have that the Georgius stored in the back of this library came from Top-Gear’s Osaka in ’95? If you managed to bring it out, would you have some way of proving it is the pair to the one you already have?”

He took a breath.

“Or has Kinugasa Tenkyou signed something admitting to this? Does he claim it arrived from the future and was made in Top-Gear? Do you…”

Hajji spread his arms and realized this was likely going to be his final question.

“Do you have a signature like that?”

His definitive question caused Heo to shrink down.

“Well…”

She hesitated, so he gave her a nod of understanding and spoke.

“Unless you have some evidence like that, this is nothing but speculation, 5th-Gear representative.”

His words reverberated through the library and everyone fell silent and motionless.

…So it ends here, does it?

With that thought, he relaxed his shoulders and turned to Sf.

“Moderator, I believe this is the end of the questioning.”

Heo and Sayama looked up in surprise, but they had nothing else they could say.

They tensed but found nothing to say as Sf slowly stood up behind them.

She looked across everyone and then to Sayama and Heo.

“Sayama-sama, Heo-sama, do you have anything to say? Do you have any way of proving your theory as Hajji-sama has requested?”

But neither of them could say a word.

This settled it.

Their argument would end in uncertainty.

And that would not change as the trial and vote began.

But to put it another way…

…If they could prove their theory here, they could overturn everything about Top-Gear.

The Gear would lose the superiority alluded to in the word “top” and it would become just another Gear. It had possessed a great many concepts and that did give it an advantage, but it could also be called “another Low-Gear”.

It would be the Gear that spoke of emotion while being a mirror image of the Gear that had destroyed it.

That would be a decent Gear to stand up to Low-Gear and its representative that spoke of reason, but…

“If you have nothing, then we can bring this to an end.”

Hajji heard Sf speak and he heard nothing from Sayama or Heo.

As silence continued, Sf simply nodded and turned to Hajji.

“Tes. Then I declare Low-Gear and Top-Gear’s question-and-answer session comple-…”

Another voice prevented her from finishing her declaration.

“Objection!!”

Racing footsteps brought the speaker in from behind Hajji and Sayama spoke the individual’s name.

“Shinjou-kun!?”

●

Shinjou charged into the center of everyone while gasping for breath.

However, she did not stop there.

Her white armored uniform fluttered upwards and her black hair flowed through the air as she spun around toward Hajji as if protecting Sayama.

Her eyebrows were slightly raised as she stared directly at the man.

“We do have proof!”

She waved a report in her hand as if spreading it out.

“I have the signature that will change the world!!”

●

Sayama glanced at Shinjou’s report after an automaton handed him a copy.

It contained additional information on Heo’s world creation theory.

In front of him, Shinjou held just one page and spoke to everyone else.

“Listen. There is proof that Georgius fell into the past. It’s right here. …You said a signature would suffice, right?”

But Sayama saw Hajji tilt his head as he looked at the English report.

“Where does it say anything about that? It just looks like a report on Georgius and Kinugasa Tenkyou to me.”

“That’s what it looks like to me too,” said Heo with a nod.

Sayama agreed with them.

But then he saw Shinjou turn toward him with her face slightly pale.

…When she is pale, it almost looks like you can see through her. How beautiful.

Wonderful, he thought as she looked at him and opened her lips.

“Look more closely, everyone. Someone’s signature is right there.”

She smiled a little.

“And just like my mom, that person must have studied mythology and the bible to guide us all. And all while telling us he did not belong here in Low-Gear…while telling us he was a mirror image.”

“A mirror image? Who are you talking about?”

Shinjou answered Hajji’s question with a certain man’s name.

“Kinugasa Tenkyou.”

That name silenced everyone.

That man had been one of the national defense department’s founders, the one to notice the Concept War before nations around the world established their UCATs, and the one to find and investigate Babel.

…But what is she saying about him?

Sayama’s questioning gaze watched as Shinjou breathed in.

She closed her eyes just once and calmed herself by bringing the ring on her right hand to her chest.

“Listen. Professor Tenkyou’s name isn’t actually Tenkyou. Did you know that?”

“Yes,” answered Sayama. He had heard this from Siegfried before. “The same characters are apparently pronounced Amayoshi or Amayasu.”

“Yes. His encyclopedia’s publication data used Amayasu. Normally, when spelled out in the alphabet, that would make his name ‘Kinugasa Amayasu’,” she said. “But according to the publication data, even Kinugasa is pronounced differently. It’s actually Igasa. And for some reason, Amayasu is spelled without the final ‘u’.”

“…”

“Do you understand what that means?”

When he heard her final question, Sayama realized it all.

And she went on to explain for everyone else.

“Igasa Amayas.”

Or when read in reverse…

“Sayama Asagi. His name was the mirror image of Sayama Asagi.”

She raised her right hand which wore a man’s ring.

“I feel like everything is finally starting to make sense. This must belong to Sayama-kun’s dad!”

As soon as she made her shouted announcement, Sayama sensed motion on top of his head.

It was Baku.

The creature was showing them the past based on the evidence they had built up.

●

Everyone saw it.

Three people ran through the center of an artificial barrier of light.

A girl took the lead, a woman in a white armored uniform was next, and a man in a similar white uniform followed.

The man held an aluminum case under each arm.

They barely had a path to walk on and their surroundings resembled sand dunes.

The sky was painfully white and the very air seemed to glow.

And for some reason, a faint song could be heard in the light. It was the hymn Silent Night.

The woman looked back to face the man who followed a step behind.

“A-chan, will we make it out in time!?”

“We will. Yu-san smiled and saw us off, so we definitely will.”

But he supported the girl as she almost tripped and pushed her forward.

Five blue stones hung from the girl’s neck and they clinked together as they swayed.

“Um, these stones…”

“Yes, don’t worry. We’re adults, so we’ll be fine, Sadagiri-kun. So please wear them without worrying about us. If you do…you will be just fine.”

He turned to the woman.

“Make sure you look after her. Yu-san…and her husband left her with us. We have to get her out of here safely.”

At that point, more light appeared behind the three of them. That explosive pressure of the void resembled a wall of light.

The three of them gasped and simply ran. There was another wall of light ahead and a hill lay behind it.

“Everyone’s there,” said the woman.

However, the explosion of light approached them from behind.

At the same time, the barrier wall emitted its light and attempted to close in order to shut out the explosion.

“…”

It was closing, but the three of them were not going to make it in time.

“…!”

The woman embraced the girl from behind as if trying to protect her from everything.

But in that moment, the two of them were shoved forward from behind.

They were pushed by the man’s left arm which held one of the two cases.

He pushed on their backs to send them outside the closing barrier.

And a moment later, the girl and women were thrown outside and the barrier closed.

There was no sound and no voices. There was only motion as the woman fell to the ground, turned back while still holding the girl in her arms, and saw it.

“Ah…”

On their side of the closed wall of light, a left arm in a white armored uniform lay on the hill where it had been severed by the barrier. It still held the aluminum case.

“Ah…!!”

The woman opened her mouth and let out a scream.

And the girl saw what was on the other side of the closed white wall: an expressionless face with empty eyes.

But she finally lowered her gaze and saw something else: a ring on the fallen left hand.

●

Shinjou walked forward.

She held her left hand in her right, removed her ring, and arrived at the desk in the center of the library.

Below the light, she looked to Sayama and smiled for some reason.

…It’s like this place was made for this very moment.

She smiled and Sayama took her right hand in his left.

The two of them faced the preparation room.

She calmed her breathing and took the first step with him.

After a second and third, they finally reached the step up from the bottom of the library.

Sayama wore his suit and she wore her white armored uniform as they reached the top step while the entire world watched on.

The entrance to the preparation room lay before them, but someone stood in front of it.

“Sf-kun? Do you want to know why we have come here?”

“As moderator, it seems only natural to ask.”

“Indeed,” agreed Sayama. “The hidden door back here requires two people to insert their hands and turn them. It seemed ideal for Shinjou-kun and me, but it would not turn for us. However…”

The two of them held up the rings they had removed from their fingers.

“These belonged to my mother and my father, but we had the genders backwards.”

“I see.”

Sf cleared her throat quietly and then held out her hands.

“Then exchange your rings.”

“Right.”

Shinjou tensed her shoulders and held out her ring.

Sayama extended his left hand and did not hesitate to stick his ring finger into it.

She blushed and he began fiddling with the ring he had removed from his finger.

“Sayama-kun, why are you pulling out super glue?”

“Well, it would be a disaster if it happened to slip off your finger.”

She swiped the ring from him and almost put it on by herself.

“You won’t do anything weird?”

“How could I possibly do anything like that here?”

“You were just about to but I stopped you!”

She then held out the ring and raised her right hand.

He took the ring and held it gently.

“Ah…”

He pulled on her ring finger and put on the ring.

…*Wow…*

She blushed when she saw how perfectly the ring fit on her finger.

“Thank you…”

“And thank you, Shinjou-kun. …Eventually, I would like to put one on your left hand.”

They walked together toward the back of the preparation room and the study.

On the back wall, two holes were positioned next to the white door. Sayama stuck his hand in the left hole and Shinjou did the same with the right hole.

At some point, everyone had left their seats and gathered in front of the preparation room to peer into the dimly-lit space.

Brunhild was there, Kazami was smiling with her arm around Brunhild’s shoulders, Sibyl and Ooki were there, Hiba’s legs were still turned inward, Harakawa was lending him a shoulder, Heo was clasping her hands as she watched Sayama and Shinjou, the plant creatures and Messengers of Wanambi were there, Tsukuyomi was saying “my, my”, Kashima was with her, Izumo was crouching down and slapping Boldman’s head, Miyako was pretending she did not care while never taking her eyes off of them, and everyone else was similarly looking at the two in the cramped space.

“…”

It happened in an instant.

The white door opened and revealed a six square meter room filled with white light.

The impossible area was due to it being a concept space.

The two of them entered the room from either side like it was a theatre stage.

Inside, they found a wooden table that looked terribly out of place and on top of it…

“An aluminum case identical to the one we saw in the past just now.”

Shinjou detected a slight tremor in Sayama’s voice.

“So my father was waiting here.”

He slowly but surely spoke the words with his right hand on his chest.

“Waiting for someone to arrive at the lies two worlds made while thinking of each other.”

He picked up the case and Shinjou supported him because he seemed on the verge of collapse.

“It’s okay, Sayama-kun. You can ache.”

She was only looking to Sayama, but everyone heard her words.

“You know what? I don’t think the pain in your chest is the guilt you feel for not dying with your mom.”

She pressed her ear against his chest.

“I think it means you’re sad.”

“You mean…?”

“Yes. You don’t let your feelings show much, you can be stupid, you can be dangerous, you’re honestly a lot of trouble, you’re beyond saving, and I think saving you would just bring you back to a previous kind of crazy, but…”

“I can see you have been observing me very closely.”

“The most amazing part is that you don’t deny any of that. …But you know what? Despite all those things…”

She let out a breath that may have been a bitter laugh.

“But you feel sadness more than anyone else. You feel so much sadness that it hurts.”

So…

“It’s okay. It’s okay to ache, Sayama-kun. If it hurts, you can rely on me. So…”

She looked to everyone else with a troubled and blushing smile.

Finally, Sayama breathed out too and faced in the same direction.

And just as they faced everyone, Sf spoke to them all from her position closest to Sayama and Shinjou.

“I suppose this proves the relationship between Top-Gear, Low-Gear, and the entire world.”

Shinjou saw everyone slowly let out a breath when they realized what Sf meant.

They held Georgius and Sayama Asagi’s signature which were the proof of this world.

Sf faced the two of them, looked to Georgius’s case, and spoke.

“Low-Gear was created by Top-Gear’s Noah, but Top-Gear was created by Low-Gear’s presence. In that case, I suppose both can be called the mother of the world.”

No one argued.

And for that reason, Sf turned back to the others with her usual expressionless face.

“In that case, I declare Low-Gear and Top-Gear’s question-and-answer session complete.”

She raised her head, waved a hand, and lowered in a curtsy.

“After a short recess, I would like to begin the trial and vote.”

Chapter 35

“Time to Vote”

Even a single extra vote can make a majority
The victor looks down at the loser
The loser looks up at the victor

●

The recess began and the people in the library thinned out.

The Messengers of Wanambi and the plant creatures remained in the representative seats and looked at each other, but the other representatives had all gone to their respective waiting rooms.

The audience seats were similarly empty.

However, a few people sat in the audience seats near the moderator's seat.

One was a gray-haired man who sat perfectly still, another was an automaton who had moved to the seat next to him, and the third…

"Oh, dear. You seem to have aged quite a bit, Itaru."

"Why are you here, German witch? You still have ten hours until the Witches' Sabbath."

"Oh, is there a narrow crossroads with a view of the sky somewhere in this school?"

The witch in a black suit laughed quietly, sat on the desk next to Itaru, and looked to the automaton on his other side.

"You did well, Sf. Especially when you shot UCAT Director Ooshiro."

"Tes. He ran off in a quadrupedal style afterwards, but where did he go?"

"My old man…well, he sometimes needs to immerse himself in his feelings a bit. He's probably on the roof with his arms around his knees, remembering old times, and building a plastic model or something. …He'll need to be subdued later."

"It sounds like he does a lot of other things while immersing himself in his feelings."

"He does," agreed Itaru. "Anything happening outside?"

"It seems a mechanical dragon arrived at Japanese UCAT. …And it was carrying 3rd-Gear's Concept Core."

"I suppose that's to show they aren't threatening 3rd-Gear during the coming trial and vote."

"Top-Gear finds the strangest areas to keep things clean."

"Like I care," he replied. "But why are you here, Diana?"

"Oh? To ask about your feelings of course."

That comment received a response.

Next to Itaru, Sf all of a sudden swung up her right arm with a handgun in her grasp.

"Diana-sama, if that is what Itaru-sama wants…"

She trailed off because a balled up piece of paper was stuck in the gun's muzzle.

Diana looked at the paper with "stopper" written on it and then looked up at Sf's face.

"Sf, you are an excellent automaton. You are so excellent that you would help your master even if he said he wanted to die."

"Tes. I was made to be excellent, so I am – on average – constantly excellent."

"That is why I just asked about something you have to have done poorly. Do you understand?"

After a pause, Sf shook her head.

"I do not. As an automaton, I cannot possibly understand, Diana-sama."

"Why not?"

"Tes. I have no emotions. My master experiences emotions in my stead. So if someone else asks my master a question which disturbs his emotions, I will be acting based on disturbed emotions."

"I'm so grateful for that egoism I think I'm going to cry."

"Tes. But that is too long a description, Itaru-sama, so why not abbreviate it to 'grateful ego'?"

"While you're at it, wouldn't 'crying ego' be cuter?" asked Diana.

After a few seconds of thought, Sf nodded.

"We can compromise and draw from a different part of the description for 'going ego'."

"Then why not 'thinking ego'? I think that sounds nice."

"Why are you two having a comedy routine over my head?"

"Oh, dear."

Diana smiled bitterly and got down from the desk.

She then turned around and began to leave, but Itaru called out to her.

"Hey, Diana."

"What is it?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Did you know?" he asked quietly.

"Did you?"

He had answered her question with a question and she answered with yet another question, so he sighed.

However…

“That’s right,” he spoke into the empty air. “It’s best not to ask about the past.”

●

A classroom contained three people.

An Arab man in white sat in the center of the mostly empty room.

“Sorry about that. Yes. …I’m sorry, Mikoku, Tatsumi.”

“Apologizing is not going to change anything, father.”

Mikoku answered from the windowsill. A large white dog sat at her feet and she used a fork to cut a piece of the cake that had been given out for the afternoon recess.

“Tatsumi and I are from Top-Gear, but you actually know more than us what Top-Gear was like back then. And…”

She looked to Hajji who was stretched out in his chair.

“Did you actually know the truth about Top-Gear’s destruction?”

“Why? Why would you think that? I’m the one that assumed everything was Low-Gear’s fault and got you all involved as I did all sorts of evil things.”

“But you would not let us inside during the attack on UCAT and you did not try to contact us after you were captured. And earlier, you set your personal grudges aside and spoke without letting us say anything. …It almost seemed like you were refusing to let us do anything wrong while making it look like you had forced us to obey your misguided actions.”

“You’re reading too much into this, Mikoku. Doing that would only harm Top-Gear, wouldn’t it?”

“Would it really?” she asked. “Are you sure you were not opposing them and letting them attack us to put Top-Gear and Low-Gear on the same level? Are you sure you were not making certain we would never be seen as the leader of the Gears or be given that burden again? And are you sure you were not putting yourself in the line of fire to ensure none of the damage would reach us? After all…” Mikoku nodded. “You often went to that church to hear Shinjou Yukio speak, didn’t you?”

Hajji briefly fell silent, but he finally shook his head.

“You are reading too much into this, Mikoku. Yes. And…we will see the result once everyone votes. We will see which is right: reason or emotion.”

“Will we?”

Mikoku took a bite of the cake, suddenly stopped speaking, and stared at the cake.

“These are whole strawberries inside! Talk about luxury!!”

“Has your character changed while I was gone? Hm?”

“Has it?” she asked before smiling a bit. “Maybe it has. A lot has happened lately.”

She cut the cake to leave the back portion behind and looked around.

Hajji and even Tatsumi, who sat at another desk, were looking at her oddly, so she frowned.

“Is it that wrong to leave the part with lots of icing for last?”

“No.”

Tatsumi and Hajji exchanged a glance.

“You sure are sociable.”

“What kind of assessment is that?”

Mikoku did not really understand what they thought of her, but one thing was clear.

“Well, at any rate, it feels like a great burden has been lifted.”

“A burden?”

“Yes. Like I said, a lot has happened. And a lot more happened today.”

She then spoke more quietly.

“But now I can believe that things are moving toward an answer…oddly enough.”

She placed the last bit of cake on her fork.

“So thank you, father. If you had not set yourself up as Low-Gear’s enemy on the night of our attack…no, since even before that, I doubt they would have gone this far to find the answer.”

“Are you sure you want to thank me? My unnecessary actions have lowered Top-Gear’s standing.”

“That’s fine. Knowing that Babel is Noah is useful for those of us who are familiar with Noah.”

Mikoku smiled and looked down at the dog looking up at her.

“You acted as our shield and now both sides understand each other. And now that we do…do you really think Top-Gear is going to lose this trial and vote?”

Hearing those last words, Hajji looked up at the ceiling and placed a hand on his chin.

“Hm.”

“This did not start here. You have a guess how everyone will vote, don’t you?”

Mikoku got down from the windowsill, nodded to Tatsumi, and opened her smiling mouth while looking straight forward.

“Personally, I think the result is sure to be interesting.”

●

Another classroom was much fuller.

A boy in a suit sat at the center of the mostly filled space and others in school uniforms and white armored uniforms surrounded him.

However, there were no smiles or joy in their voices or on their faces.

They were all crossing their arms and placing hands on their chins in their circle of chairs.

“Okay, next question. What do giraffes, hippos, and elephants have that dolphins do not.”

“O-oh, I know, Kazami! Legs!”

“Nope. The answer is fur.”

“S-something that trivial and direct doesn’t count as a quiz!!”

As punishment for the wrong answer, Kazami gave Heo a “tropical palm tree” hairdo.

Next to them, Shinjou typed on her laptop and spoke to Sayama.

“Should we really be doing this?”

“I think this is the best way to relax our nerves while maintaining the necessary tension. That is why you are typing right now, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she agreed, feeling a little apologetic and lowering the laptop screen. “I’m making a lot of progress with my novel.”

“How far have you gotten in the last month and a half?”

“It’s almost all done. It’s my first time, so it’s rough, done completely on momentum, forceful, and done my own way…” She nodded. “And I’m not talking about something dirty.”

“Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, your sensors have taken you in an odd direction.”

At that point, Kazami turned toward them, having finished braiding Heo’s hair.

“Is the vote going to go okay?”

Ooki was the one to answer. She smiled and nodded with red circles drawn on her cheeks.

“Looking at the number of votes, we should win quite easily. For one, we pretty much get four free votes from 4th-Gear and 8th-Gear.”

The others exchanged a glance and began counting on their fingers.

“1st-Gear is Brunhild and her cat. They should both go with us, right?”

“2nd-Gear is Director Tsukuyomi and Kashima-san, so those will go to us, too.”

“3rd-Gear is Gyes-san and Miyako-san, so…more for us, I guess.”

“4th and 8th were already mentioned.”

“5th-Gear is Heo and Thunder Fellow, so it’s two votes for us.”

“6th-Gear is Boldman-san and Izumo-san, so we should get both, right?”

“7th-Gear is the four ball brothers, right? I assume they’ll choose us, but how many votes is that?”

“They get two people to vote, so it must be two balls per person! Y’know, like with guys!”

Everyone averted their gaze from Hiba.

Sibyl sighed while still looking away, but then turned back and folded down her fingers.

“If we count up all of those votes…”

“Y-you’re a new one, but you’re also the worst one, Sibyl-san!! How can you completely ignore me!?”

“Then I will only somewhat ignore you. Will that do? …Anyway, um, 10th only has Jord, so all twelve Gears will cast a total of twenty-three votes. Of those, we should get both votes of 1st through 8th for sixteen votes. With Low-Gear’s two added in, that is a total of eighteen. We will easily earn a majority.”

Kazami checked by counting on her fingers. After doing so about three times, she shifted in her seat as if lying down a bit.

“So we’ll be fine. …Ah, that’s a relief. I want to eat yakiniku tonight.”

“What an odd expression of joy and relief.”

Sayama smiled bitterly and suddenly grabbed a paper napkin from the desk behind him.

Everyone watched in confusion, but he did not immediately respond and instead wrote something on the napkin.

He wrote a series of numbers and Shinjou tilted her head.

“What is that, Sayama-kun?”

“This is a battlefield of reason and emotion and these are the numbers that describe it.”

“Eh?”

“I will now write my predictions for the vote. And Kazami, I have one order for you.”

Kazami frantically sat back up and pointed at herself.

He thrust the napkin and its series of numbers toward her surprised expression.

“Let us go find the answer. …An answer void of hesitation.”

“What is this?”

“This is how I see this clash of reason and emotion ending. And for that, there is something I want you to do. Trust in my decision. …This trial and vote can be called the Leviathan Court and this is how I want it to go.”

At that point, the door opened and a maid walked in. Her hair was gray and her maid uniform black.

“I am Moderator Sf.”

She looked across them all, confirmed that the people she needed were there, and held up something.

It was a cardboard box apparently made by Diana and they all looked at the words written on it.

“Bullet Box!?”

I would expect no less of the German UCAT inspector. I have determined she has a decent sense of humor.”

Sf bowed.

“Now, representatives, please place your pure ballots in here for the sake of tomorrow.”

Chapter 36

“Solution to the Responses”

The one thing
Everyone decided on together

●

The library filled with energy once the recess came to an end.

The tension of the question-and-answer sessions had thinned now that those sessions were complete and the second recess had passed.

In the audience seats, members of different UCATS were speaking with each other and others were discussing how the vote would turn out.

But…

“—————”

Their chatter quickly vanished.

A gray-haired automaton had climbed to the moderator’s seat with a cardboard box in hand.

Without bothering to check that everyone had quieted down, she gently raised her right hand.

Something shot straight up from her hand and it had a hemisphere of plastic attached.

“People call these capsule toys or gachapon or any number of other things, but they seemed perfect for this situation. The two ballots from each Gear are inside.”

Someone spoke up from the audience.

“Th-those are from the ones I won at the cafeteria earlier! I can’t store them or take them home without the capsules!!”

Sf’s left hand was empty, so she used it to fire.

Without bothering to check that the room had frozen over, she grabbed the fallen capsule.

“The votes have been sorted by Gear. First…”

Darkness fell over the library and the only lights were on Sf, the representative seats, and the counter.

Twenty-three people sat in the representative seats and, for some reason, Sibyl and Ooki were dressed as bunny girls by the counter. The two of them held red and white artificial flowers in front of the whiteboard.

Sf looked to the two of them.

“Now, let me explain the rules. A vote for trusting Low-Gear will be white and a vote for being unable to trust Low-Gear or for trusting Top-Gear will be red.”

Ooki and Sibyl held up their white and red artificial flowers and there were even red and white daruma dolls next to them.

Everyone in the audience and representative seats nodded in confirmation of these preparations.

At the same time, Sf suddenly pulled a capsule from the ballot box.

The action was so unexpected that the automatons waiting to provide a drumroll missed their cue.

“Now, then.”

Sf opened the capsule, unfolded one of the papers inside, and read the beginning of the world’s decision.

It began with…

“Low-Gear’s representatives.”

Everyone could be heard breathing out.

“One vote in favor.”

Sayama stood up and Sf nodded.

Ooki responded by attaching a white flower to the whiteboard.

A moment later, Sf unfolded the other paper.

“One vote opposed.”

●

No one was able to react to what Sf said.

A confused silence and stillness fell as they all wondered why Low-Gear would vote against themselves.

This continued for three, five, and then ten seconds before some motion finally broke it.

Still sitting, Kazami threw her legs up onto her desk.

She crossed her legs, thrust out her chest, and adjusted her position in her chair. She was showing she had no intention of standing up.

Most of the people in the audience produced voices of confusion and protest: Why?

But…

“Keep it down!!”

没乗箱

Kazami’s dignified shout pierced through all the protests.

She took in a quick breath, raised her eyebrows, looked across everyone, and raised a hand.

“Listen carefully! We intend to look after every single Gear no matter what any of you think! We’ve decided to look after you and understand you even if you reject us or hate us!”

She breathed in again, her cheeks were slightly flushed after yelling, and she placed her hand on her chest.

“And I’m sitting here as a representative of that. …Top-Gear may have opposed us, but we will accept them too! That is why I rejected myself like that. As long as I’m here, Low-Gear will accept anyone, no matter how much they oppose us!”

Everyone grew quiet, but another voice reacted sharply to that silence.

“That sounds nice, but what if that turns out to be a deadly mistake for you? Hm?”

As soon as Hajji spoke, Sf opened a new capsule.

“9th-Gear’s representatives. …One vote opposed.”

Hajji did not stand up. He indicated his opposition with his posture and Sf unfolded the other vote.

“One vote opposed.”

“That’s just gonna be how it is.”

The old manager scratched at his head and remained seated while his suppressed groan of a voice filled the room.

But that was not all.

“Next, Top-Gear. …One vote opposed and another vote opposed.”

Sibyl’s eyebrows drooped as she hung up five red flowers. Mikoku, who had a dog sitting next to her, and Tatsumi crossed their arms without standing.

This put the vote at one in favor and five opposed.

Sf then spoke again.

“6th-Gear.”

“Wait just a second.”

Izumo stood up and only then did Sf speak.

“One in favor.”

Boldman stood up, too.

“One in favor.”

There were three white flowers now while the red remained at five.

And a moment later…

“2nd-Gear.”

Kashima and Tsukuyomi moved before their name was called.

As everyone watched, they assumed the two of them would stand to bring the tally to an even five each.

But everyone gasped when they saw what actually happened.

“Sorry. We’re pretty much the same as Low-Gear by this point, so we thought it would be safer to half reject ourselves like you did.”

Tsukuyomi wrinkled her brow in a bitter smile from her seat while Kashima alone stood.

“One in favor. One opposed.”

There were now four white flowers and six red ones. Top-Gear had the advantage.

The gap remained the same with thirteen votes remaining, so everyone looked to the moderator’s seat.

“1st-Gear.”

●

Brunhild stood.

“One in favor.”

She turned to look at Hajji and the others.

“With our other white vote, we’ll be tied at six.”

But she was answered by a sudden stir in the crowd.

“One opposed.”

“!?”

She turned to look at the source of the stir.

The black cat in the neighboring seat had not stood.

Just as her surprise and something akin to anger left her speechless, a voice reached her from the dark audience seats.

“Do you understand why we did this, Brunhild?”

“If you say it was to protect yourselves, I’ll abandon 1st-Gear right here, Fasolt.”

“That isn’t it. It really isn’t, Brunhild. This was the decision our pride led us to.”

He used his lung capacity to say it all at once with an admonishing tone.

“At the very least, some of us temporarily received the Army’s help. They helped maintain Lord Hagen’s Fafnir and found a hideout for the City faction. It seems they were acting on a few different personal grudges, but we must not forget what they did for us.”

After all…

“Without them, nearly half of us would have had nowhere to go and died.”

Brunhild tightly clenched her fists as she listened.

Part of her refused to accept that, but…

…My role is to be the 1st-Gear representative that stands on Low-Gear’s side!

She used that thought to remind herself that she had not betrayed herself.

So she spoke up before the black cat could say anything.

“Understood! It’s true I couldn’t have maintained Lord Hagen’s body or found a hideout for us. And…I wouldn’t have been able to cast an opposed vote like that!!”

“Brunhild,” said the black cat. “Are you going to bully me?”

Everyone ignored the cruelty that followed, so Sf went on to open the next capsule.

“3rd-Gear.”

As soon as she read the Gear name, Miyako answered.

“Yeah, I’m opposed and Gyes is in favor.”

●

Everyone looked to Miyako who remained seated.

But she placed her arms behind her head and stared at the flowers on the whiteboard behind her.

“This makes six white ones for Low-Gear and eight red ones for Top-Gear.”

Her tone was light and it did not seem to bother her that everyone’s eyes were on her.

“This is how it had to be. I’ll admit that Hajji guy pisses me off a fair bit, but without him, Apollo wouldn’t have lasted long enough to meet me. And, well…”

She turned to look at Gyes who stood with her eyes closed.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s just say I wanted a reason to stay seated for the sake of the child in my belly.”

Miyako slapped Gyes on the butt and Gyes cried out and frowned, but Miyako paid her no heed.

She instead looked across everyone else.

“You heard me. Low-Gear is going to support us in the future, but it was that weird old guy that supported us in the past. …That decision wasn’t a mistake.”

She released a relaxed sigh.

“Personally, I wonder if maybe the past and the future could get along with each other. Well, I guess that’s too much to ask for.”

No one could respond to her casual comment, but Sf did move on to the next votes.

“8th-Gear.”

●

In the audience seats, Shinjou stared blankly at the whiteboard.

There were six white flowers and eight red ones and 8th-Gear’s were about to be added.

“One in favor.”

Ooki held a second white flower in anticipation as she walked over to the whiteboard.

…With two more for Low-Gear, it will be eight each. That leaves 4th, 5th, and 7th.

She assumed those three would side with Low-Gear.

Top-Gear had a two vote lead, but she was certain they would catch up and overtake them.

But…

“One opposed.”

Everyone in the audience around Shinjou seemed to rise from their seats a little.

Several confused voices were uttered and Odor shouted at the lead.

“Why!? Why does Wanambi care about Top-Gear?”

The answer was immediately displayed.

On the floor in front of the representative seats, sand raced along like a snake and formed writing.
“ ‘Shinjou’!?”
Everyone read it aloud and Shinjou herself realized what it meant.
“Oh,” she said as she stood up and looked at the further writing.
“Go with” “Shinjou” “Child” “Low-Gear” “Top-Gear” “Highest” “Lowest”
“It can’t be,” muttered Shinjou as she watched on with everyone else
However, she also knew nothing could be done.
“Because I’m a contradictory being, they did this to go with me?”
Wanambi had chosen both sides to be with the person who belonged to both sides.
“…”
I guess that makes sense, she thought while sitting back down.
Her body felt oddly weak.
…Are we…in trouble?
She wondered if it was her fault.
“…!”
But she shook her head.
No, she told herself. *This was Wanambi’s decision.*
And…
“5th-Gear. One in favor.”
Heo stood with her eyebrows slightly raised and Thunder Fellow’s vote was as expected.
“One in favor.”
Two white blossoms were added and they caught up.
Low-Gear and Top-Gear both had nine votes.
Shinjou exhaled and looked down at Heo who looked back and nodded.
Heo’s expectant gaze then turned toward the two plant creatures.
There was a fear that the plant creatures would only count as a single vote because they were a single being.
But…
…One of them represents Mukiti.
Shinjou told herself they would count as two votes and that Low-Gear would pull ahead here.
“4th-Gear.”
She breathed in when she heard the name she was hoping for.
The rest of the audience nodded in acknowledgment of the coming reversal.
And Sf responded by reading the votes.
“Both votes…are invalid.”

●

“Eh?” said Heo. “Wh-why!?”
She spoke the question on everyone’s mind and the two plant creatures placed their front legs on the desk.
“With Sayama.”
“The same. The same.”
They looked at Heo, at their surroundings, and at Sayama.
“With Sayama.”
“Not different from Sayama.”
Heo felt a chill run along her spine when she heard the creatures’ innocent voices.
She knew what they were thinking.
“So you’re saying Sayama’s vote…counted as yours?”
“Yes!!”
Their excited answer received silence in response.
“4th-Gear not extra. With Sayama.”
“If add more, then different. Then not with.”
Heo almost protested and said that would put Sayama in danger.
But…
“This is what 4th-Gear is, isn’t it?”
“Yes!!”

“Heo T understands!!”

While feeling tension build in her heart, Heo saw the plant creatures nod.

…Wh-what’s going to happen now?

Both sides had nine votes for a total of eighteen. With two invalid votes, twenty votes had been used up.

That left three votes.

Sf nodded once and looked to the whiteboard.

“Please add the invalid votes as one in favor and one opposed. We do not want it to look like they had no say in the matter.”

Ooki and Sibyl added an extra flower below the others but with a slight gap from those others.

That made a total of twenty.

…Which leaves…

Heo’s heart skipped a beat when she realized there were only three votes to go.

●

Hiba listened as the automaton began to read the votes.

“7th-Gear.”

However, instead of reading what they said, she held up the ballots.

Both of them were blank.

And with them held up, she asked Hiba a question as the proxy for the representatives.

“What is the meaning of this? I told you to press the front of the sphere against the ballot for ‘in favor’ and the back for ‘opposed’. Like 4th, have they refused to vote?”

Hiba stood up.

“Um, how am I supposed to explain this? It’s kind of complicated.”

He hesitated, held his head in his hands, groaned, wrapped his arms round his body, wiggled, and bent backwards.

“Ahhh!!”

“Hiba boy, that is getting creepy, so stop.”

“I-it’s creepy when I’m not sure what to say!?”

Sf nodded.

“Raise your hand if you think it is creepy.”

Hiba hung his head when he saw everyone raise their hands and even saw Wanambi spelling out “Raised hand” and “Agree”.

“But I really don’t know what to say. Maybe I should break the tension with a joke. …Kazami-san, if you throw your chair, you won’t have anywhere to sit.”

He sighed and gave Sayama a troubled look.

“It would be so much easier if I could just say they’re both votes for Low-Gear. …Should I say that?”

“I have a feeling your careless question has ruined that plan.”

“Eh?”

Hiba thought back on what he had said and Sf spoke up.

“In other words, both votes are invalid?”

“Ahhh! I think I screwed this up!!”

“That does not matter,” said Sayama. “Now, what happened? Why did 7th-Gear vote this way?”

“Well,” replied Hiba as he recalled the question-and-answer session and looked to the four spheres floating around him. “They longed for a world they would never grow tired of. They found that world in Low-Gear, but…”

This is what they decided, he told himself.

“They do not want a ruling organization. I think what they want is the heavens and the earth of Low-Gear, regardless of who is right or who is wrong.”

“I see.”

Sayama nodded and looked behind him.

Hiba looked too and saw nine votes on both sides with two more a bit below those nine. But after all this, the votes remained perfectly even.

“That leaves…” began Sayama.

Sf nodded, pulled the final capsule from the ballot box and tossed it into the air.

“This would be 10th-Gear’s.”

●

Kazami looked to the airborne ballot capsule and closed her eyes.
Oh, crap, she thought.
…I hit her with everything I had a month and a half ago.
If she votes for Top-Gear, will it be entirely my fault?
…No!
Kazami shouted a rejection in her heart.
She had G-Sp2 which contained 10th-Gear's Concept Core, so 10th could not neglect Low-Gear.
"…!"
That's right, she thought while breathing in and opening her eyes.
She looked to the left and saw Izumo beyond a few other people.
That boy was Jord's grandson and he was on UCAT's side.
…Which means…
What? she asked herself.
Her eyebrows rose as she gave a silent prayer: Don't let us win.
She prayed while hoping that expectation would be betrayed.

●

Hajji hid his mouth.
He asked himself what was going to happen and received a rational answer.
…So this is how it ends.
With the answer in mind, he crossed his arms again.
At the same time, the automaton caught the falling ballot capsule.

●

Everyone listened.
"10th-Gear's representative."
The automaton's voice read off the vote that would determine everything between the two Gears which were tied at nine votes each.
Her emotionless voice filled the library.
"One vote for 10th-Gear."

●

Shouting broke out.
"What!?" asked some voices.
"Why!?" bellowed others.
Some simply cried out in surprise.
The loudest voice of all was Hajji's after he stood up.
"Jord!!"
He breathed in.
"Explain yourself!"
"This is nothing worth getting upset over, Hajji. Have you forgotten the Concept War already?"
Jord stood and looked across everyone with her chest calmly and proudly thrust forward.
"10th-Gear's gods are the strongest of any Gear, so we can't exactly let anyone rule over us. We will always stand at the top of the world, no matter where we are."
"The possibility had occurred to me, but are you really trampling on the answers everyone else has-…!"
Hajji began to step forward, but someone grabbed his hand to stop him.
It was someone who had circled around to his side.
"Mikoku!?"
"Father, thank you," she said. "But didn't I tell you the results would be interesting?"

Surprise filled Hajji's face when he saw her troubled smile.

"…"

He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth just once.

"So I was the one that did not understand what I was seeing." He took a breath. "So this is the kind of balanced result the world wanted."

When she heard that, Shinjou ran down from the audience seats.

She rushed to Sayama's side and unfolded a white cloth. It was the napkin on which Sayama had written his predicted results.

She gasped and looked between the napkin's numbers and Sayama's slightly sweaty face.

"You were exactly right."

"Of course I was. The world is mine, after all."

He grabbed Shinjou's hand and lifted it and the napkin into the air.

"The world is written here. And the hand holding it belongs to the girl who was born of that world. She truly is a child of god."

"Are you still saying that kind of thing?"

Shinjou ignored Kazami and the others who spread their collars and looked up in annoyance, but then she tilted her head.

"But…what happens now?"

Hearing that, everyone looked to the whiteboard behind the representatives.

Ooki and Sibyl's differently colored flowers were blossoming there.

Eleven were red.

Eleven were white.

Jord's vote was considered invalid, so another white and red vote were added to each.

Both sides now had an equal twelve votes.

When they saw the numbers and colors, the elderly representative of some country's UCAT spoke quietly.

"Oh," they said. "It looks like flowers blooming on twin trees."

Another voice seemed to speak in agreement.

The dignified voice belonged to Mikoku as she stood from Top-Gear's representative seat.

She and the dog by her side looked to only one person: the boy in a suit who could be called her opponent.

"This is the answer reached by the Gears," she said. "And I have a suggestion."

"What might that be?" calmly asked Sayama.

Mikoku thrust out her right fist.

"We settle this. At this point, the Gears will accept whichever side wins. And with that in mind…"

She made a decisive declaration as if to stifle all else.

"I wish to hold a battle between Top-Gear's and Low-Gear's representatives!"

Surprised, everyone turned around toward a certain noise.

The emotionless moderator automaton was clapping.

"An excellent suggestion. This will end the trial and vote and thus complete the scheduled meeting. So that we may all arrive at our respective conclusions…"

She curtsied. All of the automatons present grabbed their skirts below the dim lighting and lowered their heads.

"Please bring this to an end."

Chapter 37

“What I Want to Do”

Check on me a lot
And let me check on you
Because I want you to be with all of me
Because I want to be with everything of you

●

Darkness fell over Taka-Akita Academy's main gate.

A large bulletin board for students was set up on the inside of that westward-pointing gate.

It was used to summon students, inform of teachers' absences, post notifications of suspensions, and announce the results of club activities.

Currently, the lights illuminated a single sheet of paper on the board.

The imitation vellum was decorated with white and red artificial flowers and contained writing in ink.

Notice:

The Leviathan Road Meeting was concluded with equal approval ratings for both Top-Gear and Low-Gear concerning their intertwined history.

As agreed to by both parties, five representatives of Top-Gear and five representatives of Low-Gear will conclude the root conflict via combat.

If either side has insufficient representatives, a replacement can be made with approval from all other Gears.

Top-Gear: Toda Mikoku – Hajji – Nagata Tatsumi – Alex – To Be Determined

Low-Gear: Sayama Mikoto – Izumo Kaku – Kazami Chisato – Heo Thunderson (Dan Harakawa) – Hiba Ryuuji

- The battles shall be carried out one-on-one.
- The battles shall begin at noon on December 23. Weapon acquisition shall begin at dawn on December 23.
- Each representative shall acquire a Concept Core weapon at this spot before the battles begin.
- Each representative may freely choose a Concept Core weapon on a first-come, first-served basis.
- A concept space shall automatically expand around each battlefield zone in Tokyo.
- The traits of the concept space shall be influenced by the concept weapons contained within.
- If a representative's Concept Core weapon is stolen or destroyed, they will have lost the battle.
- The winner shall return their Concept Core along with the loser's Concept Core.

–December 22, 2005, Leviathan Road Meeting Moderator

The bulletin board's surroundings were completely abandoned.

Night was falling over the version of the front gate's bulletin board that had been split off into a concept space.

●

Distant noise carried through the night sky.

Small lights and shadows could be seen in a dark, dewy yard.

The lights were in the backyard portion of the large yard. They were positioned in front of a small shrine set up near the fence and trees to the west.

The garden lanterns on either side of the shrine had lit candles inside.

A single photograph had been placed in the illuminated entrance of the shrine.

It pictured a woman and her photographed eyes looked out at the boy and girl standing before the shrine.

The boy had sharp eyes and wore a navy suit.

The girl had long black hair and wore a white armored uniform.

The girl took the boy's left hand and smiled.

"Mom…and dad. And grandpa, grandma, and even great-grandpa." She nodded. "Have you all been waiting?"

She exhaled.

"Great-grandpa helped the Tamiya family, so they honored the surname Shinjou here. And it seems Sayama-kun's grandfather looked after you, too. So…"

She closed her eyes.

"You were protected by some strange people, but that's why everyone is here, isn't it?"

"Shinjou-kun, I am not sure this is the time to slip in some oddly appropriate judgements."

"I-I wasn't trying to do that."

Shinjou smiled, relaxed her shoulders, and spoke to no one in particular.

“Um, I had always thought I was alone.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” She nodded. “I felt helpless, I cried all the time, and I’ve done nothing but rely on you since I met you. But…”

She opened her eyes, looked to the shrine, looked to the mountains and the lights of the city to the west, looked up into the night sky, and stared at the moon.

She moved her gaze from the shrine that honored her surname, across the earth it stood on, and up into the heavens it connected to.

“I can’t reach the moon, but this world only exists because of what my parents and those who came before them did.”

So…

“I always thought I didn’t have parents, but if I truly hadn’t had any…the world wouldn’t be the way it is. And I don’t think I would be the way I am either.”

So…

“I think some portion of the world was made by my parents’ hands.”

She squeezed Sayama’s hand and looked back down to the shrine.

“I can’t see them or speak with them anymore, but as long as this world exists, the things they did will live on and I can add on even more.”

Which meant…

“The world isn’t our body. It’s more like a creature that lives on with our deeds carved into it. The things we’ve done will continue to exchange words in the world even if we’re no longer here.”

In other words…

“The world is like DNA.”

At that point, Shinjou slowly let out a crumbling breath.

“You know what, mom and dad? I care for you.”

Her thoughts could no longer reach them and she wished she could meet them, but that was exactly why she said what she did.

“I will take care of this world. Because I want to see all of you, I’ll take care of the world you all protected. So it’ll reach you, won’t it? What I do will pass through the world and reach what you did, won’t it?”

There was no answer to that question, but she still received one.

“It will.”

She felt a squeeze on her hand and heard Sayama’s voice.

“There is no way our thoughts will not reach the world.”

She opened her eyes wide and turned to the side, but Sayama remained facing the shrine.

“Let us make the world ache, Shinjou-kun. If we work together, it will have twice the effect. No, you count as two people, so I will have to put in some extra effort to bring it up to four times.”

“T-two is enough. It just has to reach my mom and the others.”

Sayama turned toward her and smiled in the moonlight.

“Then we can use the remaining two to make each other ache.”

He took a breath.

“I see you as a single individual, so that is just perfect. Right, Sadagiri-kun?”

He placed an arm around her shoulder and they turned back to the shrine together.

He exhaled and the breath appeared white in the air.

Realizing that their surroundings were cooling down, he spoke.

“The surname Shinjou is no longer alone.”

“That’s right.”

Shinjou looked to the shrine, blushed, and crouched down as if to show her white armored uniform to the small structure.

“How do I look? I wear this even when I’m a boy. But I like this kind of clothing and I have someone who agrees I look good in it, so…”

She did not say “don’t worry”. Instead, she smiled and said something else.

“Isn’t that great?”

She leaned up against Sayama and nodded toward the shrine.

“Now that I know that, I want to be with him.”

After a short pause, she began to sing.

This was the one thing she had remembered.

It was the same song her mother had sung and she directed it toward the photographed smile in the moonlit shrine.

Slowly but surely, the song continued.

●

As the night grew darker, the festival's light and noise grew.

Of all the colors on Taka-Akita Academy's brightly lit bulletin board, the largest was the notice for the night's costume dance party.

It took place on the general athletic grounds that the students called the Big Emperor. The large sandy area was located directly ahead from the main road and it had been transformed into a four kilometer dance floor.

The stands, decorations, daruma dolls, and other items no longer needed after the first half of the festival had been turned into a large bonfire in the center. Costumed dancers surrounded it in five circles sized extra large, large, medium, small, and extra small.

The extra large circle was four kilometers across and its dancers ran quickly around while the extra small circle had approached within a meter of the blaze. They all danced to the light music club's original song Stand By Bon.

The emotional cries of electric guitars accompanied the five-stage costumed Bon dance and the fire cast dancing shadows on the surrounding school buildings. The people watching the shadows of those dancing supermen or mystery men generally received a single impression.

"This looks like a demonic ritual meant to destroy the world."

"I don't want to hear that from someone dressed like you, Brunhild."

Kazami looked over at Brunhild as the two of them stood in front of the clubhouse near the main gate.

Brunhild still wore the black outfit she had worn to the meeting. She even wore the three-cornered hat and carried the scythe.

However, she had more to say as she drank a bottle of tea she had bought at a nearby festival stand.

"You're not one to talk in that armored uniform."

"But I don't have anything else that looks like a costume. My band outfit was designed with more emphasis on being showy."

"Showy? I think you mean indecent. How can you show your midriff in public like that?"

The one who smiled bitterly at that was not Kazami. It was Izumo who stood on Kazami's other side.

"Still, Chisato, that outfit is going to stand out. Some people are going to recognize it, you know? There are quite a few UCAT members at the school, both as students and teachers."

"Really?"

Kazami turned toward him and suddenly tilted her head and glared.

"Kaku? Could you not carry around a surfboard wearing only a swimsuit at this time of year?"

"Don't be stupid. I'm dressed as Borderman, the new hero your old man's planning!"

"Don't you mean Boarderman? To match the surfboard?"

"No, his name comes from how he always stops right on the border of unacceptable as he foments rebellion."

"That is not stopping on the border! That's running straight past it!"

"It's nice how energetic you two idiots are, Kazami. But Izumo, were you serious about that?"

"Yeah." He pulled some sunglasses from his swimsuit and put them on. "Although not many of them are part of the special division. This is the standard place for the naturalized people to send their kids and they end up getting caught up in it somehow or another. And for some, it's just because their parents were in UCAT."

He crossed his arms.

"Also, I'm sure most of the teachers are. And it isn't just the school. I'm sure there are plenty outside too and I think the numbers are growing. Even among those younger than us."

"I see."

Kazami nodded and heard the drum and bass Taka-Akita Ondo, so she looked to the dancing and wriggling group beyond the flames.

"A lot of them aren't even wearing costumes."

"It really is a demonic ritual, isn't it?" Brunhild tilted her head a bit. "More importantly, where are the others?"

"Heo is probably enjoying herself somewhere in the festival and Harakawa will be with her. Hiba went on ahead to UCAT because he's worried about Mikage. As for Sayama and Shinjou…"

Kazami looked to the graduation artwork visible as shadows on the distant schoolyard.

"They were dancing together, but then they saw the artwork their parents made and said they were going to the Tamiya house. Look, it was those creepy hands. There's one for each of Sayama's parents and one for Shinjou's mom."

She smiled, Brunhild said "I see", and Izumo said "So that's where they are."

Kazami nodded at their replies.

“They’re both idiots, but they’re a good match.”
“The way I see it, idiots have a way of being a good match for each other.”
“Oh? Like you and that black cat?”
Brunhild looked to the cat and it averted its gaze while backing away.
Kazami sighed as she watched the girl swing down her scythe and dash after the animal.
She then looked up at her partner.
“Kaku, let’s go dance too. It is our last year here.”
She pulled on his hand.
“Wait, wait,” he said as she pulled him along. “What about my surfboard?”
“Just stick it in the ground somewhere.”
He looked down at his outfit with a troubled look.
“But without the board, I’ll look like a freak.”
“You already do!!”

●

“Hey, Sayama-kun?”
Shinjou’s voice filled the wooden room.
She forced a smile below the dim light of a single lightbulb.
“Why was the futon already laid out?”
“Hm. It seems to happen automatically. That is the Tamiya house’s detached room for you.”
“And. Who. Arranged. For. It!?”
She repeatedly slapped the single futon and blanket.
“And it even has two pillows like for a couple!”
“Well, we will not need three for a while yet.”
That comment left her speechless and her face rapidly grew red.
She tried to say something.
“Ah…”
But she found she could not put her thoughts to words and realized this had taken a turn for the worse.
“I-I’m leaving.”
She stood up while keeping her head lowered to hide her heated face.
Still sitting on the futon, Sayama looked up at her.
“Why?”
“B-because…”
She had difficulty gathering her thoughts.
“This isn’t right. Something about it isn’t right. It’s, um, uh…”
She had a single thought.
…It feels like we’re making other people do things for us.
I’m such an awful girl, she thought.
“I’m leaving. I am.”
She took the first step, wondered what she was doing, wondered why she was not stopping, and started past Sayama.
“Wait, Shinjou-kun!”
He moved in front of her and grabbed her to stop her. And he did so while still on his knees.
His height meant his arms wrapped around the back of her thighs and his face pressed against her lower stomach.
“I cannot let you have that look on your face, Shinjou-kun.”
“Where do you think you’re looking when you say that!?”
“Ha ha ha. Your navel through the armored uniform, of course. And if I look up, I can see the silhouette of your breasts.”
“Y-you never listen! You need to be more open to what I’m saying!”
“Then let us both be open.”
He used his knees to spread her legs.
With a defenseless zone below her body, she shrank back.
However, he excitedly moved his knees further in.
“Now our coordinates are even closer! Not long until we are safely together!!”
To prove that did not mean safety, she rained blows down on the top of his head.
“Y-you don’t have any idea how I feel, do you!? I’m going to keep this up until you lose all your extra lives!!”

“C-calm down, Shinjou-kun! I believe my life comes with no extra continues!”

“No mercy.”

The next blow must have hit in just the right spot because Sayama groaned and shrank down.

However, that movement stuck his face between her thighs.

She cried out and tried to escape by pulling out her legs, but his arms were wrapped around the base of her thighs on the back side. He was also spreading her legs with his knees, so it could not have been more difficult to keep her balance.

“Y-you’re latched on as tightly as some kind of mythical creature! Are you the mythical Crotch-Grabber!?”

“How could you cast such aspersions on the butt fairy!? Still, I think the mythical Old Thigh Man sounds better.”

Hearing that, she frantically looked around.

“A spear. I need a spear. P-preferably something that can ward off evil!”

“While this is entertaining, you need to calm down, Shinjou-kun. With an emphasis on ‘down’.”

Sayama lowered his arms. The arms that had been grabbing at her butt reached the backs of her knees instead and they pulled to send her tumbling down.

She fell onto her legs and found herself sitting on Sayama’s lap.

“See? There you go.”

He grabbed her hands to help her balance in her slightly backwards leaning pose and he placed her hands on his shoulders which left her with no choice but to look at his face.

That face was as expressionless as ever and he looked her directly in the eye before nodding once.

“Then let us leave, Shinjou-kun.”

“Eh?”

Her body suddenly seemed to float.

She cried out as Sayama’s arms wrapped around her butt and the back of her knees.

He then lifted her up.

She panicked, but more at having her vision up so high than at being held. She leaned on his left shoulder and wrapped her arms around his head.

“W-we can leave?”

“Combining when the two are not in sync stereotypically leads to a failed combination or a combination accident.”

“But are you okay with us leaving?”

I’m sure he is, she thought with an inward sigh.

With that in mind, she relaxed her shoulders.

“Maybe I was the only one worrying about Ryouko-san…”

“Oh, Ryouko? I do feel bad for what I did to her.”

“For what you did to her?”

“Yes.” He nodded and glanced down at the futon. “Before leaving with you the day before yesterday, I laid out this futon. Ryouko was quite angry that I left nothing for her to do.”

“Oh? So you were the one that put it here.”

“Yes. I thought it would surprise you.”

“Oh?” she said again while resting on his shoulder.

She then grabbed his head, lightly kicked his shoulder and chest, and leaned back in midair.

“Tell me that sooner!!”

She sent a full-powered knee into his chest.

●

Three minutes later, Shinjou was fixing the futon.

Even though she complained, she could not deny that she was blushing and, when she turned around…

“I didn’t know an expressionless face could be so filled with anticipation, Sayama-kun.”

“I cannot help it when I think about the fact that you are fixing our futon. It is just so sexy.”

Don’t let him trick you, she told herself while finishing up by correcting the positions of the pillows.

She sighed and reluctantly scooted over toward him.

“Shinjou-kun, why not come sit here again?”

He patted his lap, so she thought for a moment and looked to the four walls, the ceiling, and the window.

“No one’s looking?”

“Ryouko would never allow it.”

She gasped at that name but thought about what it must mean.

“I wonder if this is hard for her.”

“If it was, she would not be so affectionate toward you.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “I hope you’re right. Yes…”

She sat facing him on his lap.

He then removed his suit coat and placed it over her shoulders. After hiding her from their surroundings like that, he took her hands and wrapped them around his shoulders.

“Now, then.”

And he embraced her.

Before she could even breathe, he brought their bodies close and the inside of the suit coat tickled at her arms.

So this is what boys wear, she thought just as he raised the head she had pressed against his shoulder.

“…”

And their lips met.

Wow, she thought. *Woww,* she added. *Oh, wow,* she also thought.

The three thoughts combined into permission.

His tongue came knocking at her lips and she wondered if that was the polite way of doing it.

She accepted the tongue with her lips, embraced it with her own, and felt her tongue held close.

“Nn,” she breathed. He considerately pulled his lips away, but she pushed in to show it was fine.

They twisted their bodies to deepen their greeting and seemed to form waves.

“Ah.”

After parting, they spent a few seconds catching their breath.

Even inside the room, their breaths were white.

“Are you cold, Shinjou-kun?”

“I-I’m not, but… Ah, wait.”

She started to remove his tie.

“I should remove this, shouldn’t I? If I don’t, I might end up strangling you.”

“I have a feeling your initial conditions there are not quite accurate…”

They are, she told herself as she removed the tie and looked at him in his shirt.

“U-um…”

She was unsure whether she should remove the shirt.

She panicked when she realized she was blushing and thought back to their usual nights and evenings.

…Oh, he always removes his shirt himself.

He would never remove his clothes before hers and he would only ever remove the bare minimum of his own.

Wow, so this is my first time stripping him, she thought as she saw him nod.

“In our doujinshi, you always strip me from below.”

“What have you been reading!?”

He had yet to find out that she had bought one of them on the pretext of needing reference material for her writing.

“Honestly,” she said to avoid the issue.

She unbuttoned the shirt, starting at the top, and his skin gradually appeared below.

“S-Sayama-kun, you don’t have to strike a pose for each button. You really don’t. I-if you scare me…look, my hand is shaking and preparing to poke you in the eyes.”

“That is a dangerous way of expressing fear.”

Before he had finished speaking, she had unbuttoned down to his navel.

…This is as far as I can go.

She could have sworn steam was rising from between the hair hanging over her downturned head.

Nervous sweat appeared on her back and neck, soon covered her entire body, and made her feel hot and damp. So to hide that fact…

“U-um, I unbuttoned your shirt. Wh-what should I do now? Strangle you!?”

“Please stop strangling me to hide your embarrassment. And unfortunately for you, it is now my turn, Shinjou-kun.”

Eh? she thought as he reached for the chest of her armored uniform.

The soft material could be removed by pulling the clasps from the hem.

“Ah…”

The thin inner suit was exposed, but he immediately used his fingernails to open it from her neck and down to below her navel.

Her breasts were still covered, but everything from her sweaty throat to the flesh below her navel was bared.

The suit clung to her, so the shape of her body was perfectly visible in the dim light.

She looked to the necktie that had fallen between her breasts.

“You aren’t going to remove my tie?”

“I have wanted to see you like this since I first met you.”

“Y-you like it partially clothed!?”

As soon as she said that, he stuck his left arm below her waist and sent her tumbling backwards.

“Ah.”

She now lay face-up on the futon.

It worried her to only see the ceiling and the lightbulb in the darkness, but his face soon came into view and moved in close.

“…”

As their lips met, he removed her shoulder armor, the suit below, and the skirt at her waist.

Fighting it would do no good, but she did not want to just be at his mercy. That contradictory feeling led her to squirm and make his work more difficult while also pulling him closer to feel more of his warmth on her lips.

She felt his left hand remove her inner suit and reveal her body below while leaving only the frame, armpits, side, and waist portions in place.

He stripped the suit way by sticking his hand between the thin material and her skin. His slightly chilly palm would gropingly grasp her sweaty skin and his fingers would ticklishly wrap around her.

…*My sweat.*

Her skin would bulge out between his grasping fingers and she felt like the moisture was being squeezed from her.

It embarrassed her, which quickened her breathing. Her lips were sealed by his, so her breathing grew even more erratic and she sweated even more.

His middle finger traced between her breasts, accurately followed the line down to her navel, pressed on her navel, continued further down, and then moved back up. He repeated the process with a set rhythm, but it soon grew random, which made Shinjou realize how impatient she was.

“No.”

She breathed in.

“Quit teasing me.”

“Very well, but you seem to be misunderstanding something. Still, I will be gentler.”

He did it more gently and she squirmed.

Her sweaty breasts were exposed to the cool air, her bare stomach and navel rose and fell as she breathed, and he moved his hand to the bottom of her stomach.

“…”

After a pause, she nodded.

She did not close her eyes. She wrapped her left arm around his neck, placed her right hand on her mouth, and looked.

She was being fully exposed.

He removed the soft armor and she felt a chilliness reach the space from the joint between her legs to her butt.

“Ah…”

Before she could say anything, their lips met once more and he swallowed her words.

No fair, she thought while also feeling relieved. It was a troublesome combination.

He then placed his fingernails on her stockings and tore them from the inside.

“Ah, w-wait! If you tear those…”

“Do not worry, Shinjou-kun.”

He pulled something from the back pocket of his pants.

“I have spare stockings here. …What is that look for? Do you have a problem with my assistance?”

“At this point, anything I said would be halfhearted…”

“You brought your own spares, didn’t you?”

“D-don’t ask that…”

She then realized her exact state of undress. The front of the suit had been entirely stripped away and opened up.

“Can you see me, Sayama-kun?”

“Yes.” He moved back a bit and nodded. “This is you, Shinjou-kun.”

●

She nodded and he first brought his lips to her forehead. He then lowered them to her eyelid, nose, lips, throat, and collarbone. He both licked and pecked at her skin.

“You taste just like blood.”

“Stop…”

He pressed his ear below her chest to listen to her pulse, held his cheek to her navel to feel her warmth, and…

“Ah, S-Sayama-kun. U-um… Any lower and…”

“Shinjou-kun, what good is practice if it is not as much like the real deal as possible?”

He lifted her knees up and did as he had said. He did so carefully and she felt some dampness reach her down below.

“———”

She kept silent but trembled a bit, so he realized what she was thinking and spoke.

“I will make sure to do the same when you are Setsu-kun as well.”

“Ah, b-but…”

“People must be fair in all things.”

Before she could protest, he did as he said, as if warming her body.

“…Ah…ah…”

She gasped several times and the ticklishness and embarrassment caused her to raise her knees and bend backwards as if trying to escape. But she twisted too much and rolled over onto her stomach.

“Ah.”

She frantically tried to get up and face Sayama again, but she could not gather any strength in her hips and collapsed.

She sat with her spread knees on the futon and her body collapsed forward, so her hips were raised toward Sayama.

“U-um, Sayama-kun. This was, u-um, an unavoidable accident, so…”

“It would seem people have trouble knowing what to say when they are filled with too much happiness.”

“What kind of happiness are you talking about!?”

She stretched her arms below her body and tried to hide the area between her legs, but Sayama grabbed those hands.

She was lying face down with her butt lifted high into the air and now her hands were being pulled back between her legs.

Before she could think anything, her upper body was pressed against the floor. Her knees were fixed in place as if opening toward her stomach, so the tug on her hands caused her back to arch backwards.

“S-stop, Sayama-kun. And being a butt spirit is no excuse…”

“Oh, so you finally accept the existence of my guardian spirit, Assmodeus III!?”

“I was only making a joke to hide my embarrassment, so don’t respond like that!!”

The spirit brought his lips in close.

“Hyah!” she cried and tried to move away, but her upper body and knees were held in place. Bending her waist was the most she could manage. As she twisted out of the way, the dampness would pursue and she gradually lost track of whether she was the chaser or the chased.

There was nothing to be done about it and her stomach simply rose and fell as her entire body seemed to undulate.

…*Ah*.

She realized she was lying on Sayama’s suit.

So she gave herself over to it. Her sweaty skin did not slip on the suit’s material, so she buried her face in it as if entrusting her body to the cloth and sweaty friction.

“…!”

A long tremor ran through her body, she breathed in a few times, and she entrusted her surging body to Sayama.

She no longer tried to escape. She instead did as she pleased.

And after some unknown amount of time passed, she realized the only remaining motion was the rising and falling of her shoulders.

Ah… she thought while twisting her limp body and wiping away the sweat now that she was free.

She rolled onto her back and saw Sayama looking down on her from above.

The embarrassment of realizing he had been looking at her this whole time brought tears to her eyes, but he smiled at her.

“You are beautiful, Shinjou-kun.”

“Y-you’re saying that again?”

She looked up at his bare upper body and realized something.

“This is really not the time to make a joke, you know?”

“When have I made a single joke this entire time? We need to take this seriously, Shinjou-kun.”

“That really cooled me down…”

“Heh heh. It is so lovely how inconsistent you can be, Shinjou-kun. …Perhaps I should try to do the same.”

“You mean you’ll get even worse?”

With that said, she relaxed her body.

She let out a warm breath and removed her hand from her throat. She moved the hand down along her side and found him between her slightly raised knees.

“Honestly… There’s nothing to hide or any need to, is there?”

“There never was, Shinjou-kun.” He smiled. “I have always been looking at you as you are.”

“Why does that sound so concerning coming from you? Well, it doesn’t matter.”

She smiled bitterly because her heart could not deny the heat and sweat covering her body.

However…

“Sayama-kun, are you sure you don’t want my butt facing you? You are a butt spirit, after all.”

“But then I could not embrace you from the front.”

“That’s right.” She felt a little relieved, but her cheeks also flushed. “Then… Can we do it that way later? I like it when you praise me.”

He gave her a troubled look and seemed not to have expected that.

“For some reason, you seem to be under the impression that I am an indecent person.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t think that at all. …What I think goes far beyond that!”

“Calm down, calm down.”

He brushed up her bangs and stroked her head.

She narrowed her eyes and he wrapped his left arm around her shoulder and toppled forward.

She felt her raised knees pushed outward, so she raised her legs a bit to wrap them around his body.

“Sayama-kun, will you check on my body to the very end?”

He smiled a little at that.

“I cannot do that.”

“Eh?”

“After all,” he said. “There is also Setsu-kun and I never want to stop checking on you. We can’t have today be the end.”

So…

“So I would like to continue checking on you forevermore.”

“Then…”

She breathed in, formed words from the feeling filling her chest, and raised her arms to embrace him.

“So do I!”

As if to show his agreement, he held her tight and she realized her spoken wish had been granted.

Chapter 38

“City of Destruction”

Let’s make this exciting

●

Below the midday winter sky, dried leaves blew by an abandoned gate of concrete and steel.

It led to a school and contained a steel panel engraved with the name Taka-Akita Academy.

A motorcycle was stopped in front of the gate.

The 400cc Japanese bike had no driver.

Its driver instead stood before the bulletin board near the gate.

A sheet of imitation vellum decorated with artificial red and white flowers hung on the long board and a boy and several maid automatons stood before it.

The boy listened to the red-haired automaton that stood in front of the others.

“You are the last one here, Hiba-sama.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think the others would get moving so quickly.”

“Testament. It is true this has nothing to do with the others. …Did you naturally oversleep?”

“No, um… Are you mad, #8-san?”

“Automatons lack the emotion of anger.” #8 thought for a moment. “But I do wonder why you are a step behind on such an important occasion.”

“I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? How many times must I tell you that I am not angry?”

“You’re clearly really, really angry!!”

The automaton next to #8 whispered something in her ear and #8 nodded before turning back to Hiba.

“That is true. …Someone as delusional as you may be unable to understand our lack of emotions. But none of that really matters, so you had better please hurry up and complete your duty as a representative.”

“Sorry. And was that a command or a request?”

She gave him a cold look, so he averted his gaze to the side.

There, he spotted a festival stand with a hanging banner that said “Concept Core Weapons” and more automatons waiting for him with a smile.

“Would you like play the lottery? Or how about target practice? If you hit, you win some liquid candy with your weapon!!”

“Oh, then I choose strip rock-paper-scissors!”

“…What?”

“D-don’t take it seriously!!”

Meanwhile, a black-haired automaton carried a large silk bag over from the back shelf.

She placed it on the counter and opened it to reveal…

“7th-Gear’s…”

“Testament.” #8 walked over and looked at the four floating spheres. “This is the final Concept Core. The other representatives have taken the others to their battlefields. …You could say this Concept Core has grown accustomed to you after yesterday’s question-and-answer session.”

“…They waited for me?”

“Testament. …Though to be blunt, I think the others avoided them because they seem difficult to use.”

“Then what was that ‘testament’ for!? And that was just rude, even if it’s true!!”

As he shouted back, Hiba put the four spheres back in the silk bag. The white sphere attempted to escape and he had to grab for it several times before catching it, but he finally succeeded and placed the bag over his shoulder.

He took a breath.

After closing and then opening his eyes, his eyebrows were raised.

He then bowed to the automatons.

“I’m going.”

“Where to?”

Hiba thought for a moment and looked toward his motorcycle.

“Maybe taking the train would be safer.”

“I am not interested in your motorcycle or your safety. I am simply curious where you are going.”

“Just generally to the east.”

“Testament. I have determined you have no plan.”

“Y-you were the one that asked! Just because you’re lonely without Ooshiro-san around is no excuse!”

Just as #8 frowned at his words, someone in a lab coat rolled forward out of some bushes to the side.

“#-#8-kun!” he shouted while still rolling. “So you really are lonely without me!?”

The automatons had been using a waterway to wash the dishes they used to make the liquid candy, so they opened the entrance to the waterway and Ooshiro smoothly fell right in like it was an open manhole.

“Ah, what!? I flowed right in as naturally as river water!”

The automatons replaced the metal lattice cover, tied it shut with wire, and began washing the man away with the hose on full blast.

#8 monitored the process for about three seconds but then turned back to Hiba.

“Hiba-sama, have you gone to see Mikage-sama?”

“Yes, last night. …But I only got as far as the door to the room. They wouldn’t let me see inside.”

“So she is still…” began #8, but Hiba smiled and nodded.

“Don’t worry. As long as I’m here, she’s sure to wake up eventually.”

“Is that so?” #8 finally smiled, brought her heels together, corrected her posture, and bowed. “Then please get going, final representative. We are waiting for the results…the results for the entire world.”

●

Starting in the afternoon, the Kinugasa Library had become a used book marketplace.

It was mostly used by third years getting rid of books they no longer needed, but the unneeded textbooks were only the beginning. The books belonging to some popular people would be auctioned off and some clubs used the location to distribute manuals to passing certain classes or maps of the best peeping spots on campus.

The lower parts of the stepped library contained the used book marketplace while the upper half contained the register and a rest area.

In one corner of that rest area, someone in a school uniform sat by the counter. It was Shinjou and, instead of killing time or chatting, she was using the space to type on her laptop.

Her long hair was tied back with a ribbon and she swayed back and forth with a small tempo while typing.

She typed quickly and the words appeared on the screen faster than one could speak them.

And as she typed…

“Heh heh…”

She suddenly laughed quietly and the IME chose the wrong character.

She quickly fixed it, but her loose smile remained.

“I’m like Ooki-sensei, aren’t I?”

That’s a dangerous thing to say, she thought, but she did not stop typing.

She was writing a novel. It was her own private work and it was based on the things she had seen and heard.

The story created a kind of answer for her. She had taken as many of the things she did not understand as she could and included them as mysteries. Through that, the answer was coming into view.

She had come this far like that and today was going to be her last day of writing.

She had spent a month and a half on this and she had reached the blissful last spurt.

This would be her first complete work. She wanted to treat it with care, but her desire to enjoy the process allowed her to type with such great speed.

It seemed contradictory that letting herself have fun with it was allowing her to finish it more quickly, but she still gave into that speed.

The festival music seeped in from outside.

The voices and footsteps of classmates, underclassmen and upperclassmen surrounded her.

She heard a song inside herself.

And lastly, she knew Sayama was nearby.

He had chosen the school as his battlefield. He had made a concept space out of the large schoolyard and he waited there for his opponent.

They did not know who his opponent would be, but…

…I’ll wait here for him.

I’ll wait until he comes back, she decided.

He always came to her. He was sure to come and be with her.

So I’ll trust in him and wait, she thought while pressing her feet against the ground.

Her legs threatened to tremble if she grew distracted, so she held them down and breathed in.

She straightened her posture, listened to her surroundings, sang in her heart, and moved the story along in her thoughts.

She engraved the story in electrons to store it all here.

The words were a song and the expressions her imagination. Her thoughts would be conveyed, but who would they reach?

With the keyboard as her instrument, she calmly played her story and all it entailed.

She trusted that it would all be okay.

She trusted that her story would get through to him even when they were not together.

●

The JR Chuo Line cut east to west through Tokyo and it converged with many other lines at Shinjuku Station.

One of those was the JR Yamanote Line which circled the city center as a beltline.

The line circled north and south from Shinjuku, but both directions passed through Ueno, Harajuku, and Ikebukuro before returning to Shinjuku.

The railway formed an infinite loop, the trains were constantly busy, and once evening arrived, it began to fill with men and women in suits leaving work early or students finished with club activities.

As one train approached Shinjuku while circling northward, something in one train car was in everyone's way.

It was a large boy who carried a surfboard case as tall as he was.

He wore a brown coat and stood by the door, but his wide shoulders reached the pole at the edge of the seats and the top of the surfboard case reached the ceiling.

Those in suits and school uniforms all kept their distance from him.

But suddenly, the boy looked to the surfboard case he carried on his back.

A portion of the case was made from clear plastic. The inside was mostly dark, but a green glowing word was visible inside.

"Lonely."

"Yeah, Chisato isn't here."

Izumo looked out the window and into the sky. Even higher up than the advertisement blimp in the northern Shinjuku sky, he saw a few airplanes.

Those were the information-gathering planes the UCAT automatons had sent out to keep track of the battles.

The radomes were used to detect concepts and gather information from within concept spaces, so the planes were linked with Kanda, the Japanese UCAT underground headquarters, and American UCAT in Yokosuka to provide reports on the progress of the battles.

"So we have an audience as we fight over the world, do we?"

"Excited?"

"Maybe."

He smiled bitterly as he spoke and the surrounding people backed further away.

Some girls in school uniforms spoke from the edge of a group of office workers.

"That guy's been talking to his surfboard and grinning."

"Ugh, he stinks."

That doesn't make sense, he thought while remembering that his own partner would still hit him even when it did not make sense.

…I just don't get girls.

Just as he thought that, someone pushed their way toward him from behind the group that was attempting to keep its distance.

Oh, c'mon, he thought with a frown.

The people before him thinned out as if being worked apart and the area grew lightly congested.

The source of the wave of congestion came from the entrance to the next train car.

Someone stood there.

It was a slender-faced woman with long black hair and white skin.

She looked human, but Izumo's discerning eye told him she was a doll.

This was a doll made by Top-Gear. She wore a black maid uniform, including the hair decoration. Also…

"Aren't you a little tall?"

Izumo crossed his arms as he referenced the fact that the maid doll was just as tall as he was.

Her slender and well-featured form was clearly over a head taller than the surrounding crowd.

Everyone else tried not to look at her, but they could be seen glancing over at her.

The girls behind the office workers spoke again.

"Wow, that's some real cosplay. …She's so tall and cool."

Oh, c'mon. I'm just as tall as her, thought Izumo.

At the same time, a sound reached him inside the shaking train: footsteps.

Rather than stomping or making too much noise, the maid doll walked toward him as quietly as the ticking of a clock.

She walked straight forward and maintained a tip-toed posture that avoided stepping on her heels.

The crowd parted to let her through and the footsteps arrived right in front of Izumo.

She's huge, he thought while looking farther down than her head.

...If those breasts were real...

No, wait. Could you use evolutionary theory to say her breasts grew to match her height? So this is the wonder of Top-Gear bust technology. But wait. The more slender she is below the chest, the bigger any "surface attachments" look and these really shouldn't just be called "big". They should be called "BIG!", so...

"Where do you think you're looking?"

"Oh, you can talk? I'm having some pretty deep thoughts right now, so check back later."

"Hold on, little boy. Are you okay?"

Recognizing the voice, Izumo frowned.

"That old factory manager is controlling her remotely? So you're their replacement representative. What a letdown."

"Yeah, probably. Anyway, this is the latest model and she can do a lot automatically. It's a Top-Gear semi-automaton."

"Top-Gear claims they'll accommodate all of the Gears, but it looks like you're out of luck if you don't like them big."

"Yeah, thanks to the postwar backlash, I actually like America a fair bit."

"C'mon, old man. I'm gonna tell your wife you said that."

Izumo and the maid doll laughed and slapped each other's shoulders, but soon grew serious and pressed their foreheads together.

"You're gonna die, old man. What's this America nonsense? I'll feed you to a Holstein!"

"Shut up or I'll have to make you cry, brat. You don't know how we struggled after the war, so you don't have the right to talk about plentiful America!"

"The hell did you say? Did you forget that Chisato destroyed your argument and beat you quite spectacularly? ...And now you show up as a doll with huge but fake breasts? Are you trying to trick me!?"

"Yes, and I'm pretty damn sure I succeeded earlier."

The two of them continued pressing their foreheads together.

"This is pretty deep."

"Yeah... it is."

They exchanged a glance, nodded, and pulled back from each other.

"How about we get this started in the shopping district?"

"Sure."

A moment later, the train began to brake to stop at the station.

It shook and the people did as well.

Everyone inside cried out a bit and braced themselves.

At some point, the two people standing by the door had vanished.

●

In Japanese UCAT's Kanda Laboratory, an automaton gave a quick report.

"Izumo-sama has made contact with the enemy! Concept space expansion complete."

As soon as the automaton with short brown hair finished speaking, red dots appeared on the map of Tokyo displayed on the ceiling.

There were two dots: one for Izumo and one other.

They all faced the consoles they had used in the battle against Black Sun and a report arrived via shared memory that one of the surveillance planes flying above Shinjuku had flown into the concept space.

A staticky voice reached them.

"This is #21 of Relay Team 1, positioned above Shinjuku."

As if in response, movement filled the large room below Kanda.

It came from #8 and Ooshiro who sat at the large console in the center.

After clearing her throat, #8 spoke.

"We will now bring you the series of five battles that Low-Gear and Top-Gear are fighting over the right to use the Concept Cores. Commentary will be provided by me, Japanese UCAT's automaton #8, and..."

She turned toward Ooshiro.

"Well, just me."

"#8-kun! Th-that was just mean! And I think your announcement grew a little fuzzy there!!"

She ignored him and turned the microphone back to herself.

“This broadcast is sponsored by American UCAT, ‘The World Police’, and sent from Japanese UCAT, ‘Those who give even the unneeded a chance’. Now…”

She took a breath.

“How are things on the scene?”

●

The battle began with a slash.

In the empty train, Izumo grabbed the contents of the surfboard case on his back.

“Ohhh!”

He immediately swung it down from overhead.

The blade sliced through the case and the long seat behind him.

With multiple sounds of destruction, the roof split open in a full moon arc and materials scattered everywhere as the attack continued on its way.

The blade approached its enemy.

The maid doll lowered her hips defensively as the sword threatened to slice her in two.

And she fearlessly stepped toward Izumo even as he sent pieces of the surfboard case flying and swung down V-Sw.

Wind blew in through the split in the roof and the evening sky came into view.

The maid doll pulled a thick knife from below her apron and stayed low as she approached.

But at that moment, Izumo stepped toward her with his right foot.

“————!”

The step extended his reach and took the form of a kick straight toward the maid doll’s face.

He would counterattack with the kick and swing down his sword as she was knocked back.

But the maid doll continued forward nonetheless.

She nimbly jumped up onto Izumo’s leg.

“Seriously!?”

She moved a few steps up his leg with lowered hips and the knife was pulled back at the ready in her right hand.

Izumo could not evade. The motion as he swung down his sword would stab himself with the knife.

The knife approached, but Izumo reacted.

He slid his back pivot foot forwards as if forcing himself down into a sitting position.

He took a sliding stance, his front leg fell down to the knee, and he lost sight of the maid doll on that leg.

Still lying on the ground, he used both hands to swing V-Sw down toward his own knee.

This would have hit the maid doll, except she used the instant to jump straight up toward the opened ceiling.

“You’re running!?”

As soon as he shouted, the train passed through the next station without slowing and continued toward Shinjuku.

The maid doll vanished as if passing through the wind. She was now beyond the ceiling and beyond the evening sky.

“Dammit!”

Izumo used V-Sw’s centrifugal force to try to stand up.

“?”

But he realized something had fallen near him.

A light sound came from a red cylinder with sparks flying from one end.

“Hold on. That looks just like cartoon dynamite.”

Immediately following that observation, explosive flames enveloped the train car.

●

The maid doll stood atop a train in the setting sun.

She was on the front end of the third car.

Black smoke trailed from the car behind her, but she paid it no heed.

The train was approaching Shinjuku Station.

After slipping below the tall station building, the train entered the shadows.

In the darkness, the train passed right by the platform it would normally stop at and reentered the evening sunlight.

From here, the train would travel to the Ikebukuro region.

And just as the train passed that point on the right, the maid doll saw something to the side.

Someone was running along the platform fast enough to keep up with the train.

“You’re still alive, boy?”

It was Izumo.

He had expanded charms around his body as he ran and the maid doll saw V-Sw in his hand.

She looked back to the blown-up car and saw a large hole torn near the door.

“So you broke through with that huge thing just before the explosion, did you?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Covered in soot, Izumo ran alongside the train, sped up even further, and grabbed V-Sw in both hands.

“Hey, how about you start taking this seriously? You’ve got a Concept Core, don’t you?”

“You’re gonna regret asking that.”

The maid doll expressionlessly reached for her back, pulled something out, and swung it below the light of the setting sun.

“Gram. I’ll be using 1st-Gear’s power of writing.”

The maid doll held a magic marker in her left hand and raised Gram in her right.

●

Izumo jumped down from the platform and continued running alongside the train.

As he made his way along the concrete elevated structure, he thought about the traits of his and his opponent’s weapons.

…Gram can give form to writing.

V-Sw could regenerate and evolve the things it destroyed.

The concept space was set up so both powers could be used to their fullest. Izumo would be able to use Gram’s power to an extent and the maid doll would be able to use his power to an extent.

And on the train’s roof, the maid doll raised Gram and wrote something on it with her marker.

“ ‘Form’? What is that supposed to do!?”

When she heard that question, the maid doll’s expression changed in the wind.

She smiled.

She then adjusted her grip on Gram.

It almost looked like she was going to stab it into her own gut, but she instead let it pass below her arm and toward the western sky.

“Do you know what the western region between Shinjuku and Ikebukuro is called?”

Izumo thought and frowned.

“Hyakunin-cho…”

“Exactly right, boy!!”

The maid doll stabbed Gram into the air.

A sword should not have been able to stab into empty space, but Gram did just that with a roar.

A moment later, white cracks ran through Hyakunin-cho’s sky.

●

The surveillance plane flying through the concept space attempted to move away from the oddity.

Inside, some automatons were monitoring the situation below.

“If we move away, the accuracy of our scans will drop!!”

“Please try to understand. This is a battle between weapons that support entire worlds. Get too close and we would be destroyed in an instant.”

The pilot automaton gave control instructions by mouth while conversing via shared memory.

However, her thoughts received no response from the surveillance automatons.

She tilted her head when only silent static arrived.

“What is the matter?”

“Oh, um, well… I think the surveillance equipment may be malfunctioning. From the moment Gram stabbed into the air, the sensors’ meters have maxed out. …But that would mean…”

Some time passed and the pilot determined it to be hesitation.

After hearing a breath, the automaton looking at the surveillance equipment gave a panicked shout.

“Here it comes! Gram is activating!!”

Her voice grew to a scream.

“The world is going crazy!!”

●

“Come forth, One Hundred Dolls!!” [1]

As soon as the maid doll swung Gram as if pulling it from the air, Izumo looked to the buildings and roads spread out below the elevated train track.

“————”

They all stood up.

Dolls made from the city itself tore themselves from the earth.

A din of destruction filled the air as a literal one hundred of them stood.

Those city dolls had no faces and their arms and legs had no definite form, but they were all about twenty meters tall.

However, the maid doll did not even watch them stand. Instead, she wrote “Bullet Train” on Gram.

“How about you deal with them!?”

As soon as she stabbed the blade into the still-smoking train, its speed increased dramatically.

Its motor sounded loudly, its horn blared, and the bullet train shot forward.

It was now moving much too quickly for Izumo to keep up, even with his charms.

“Dammit!”

As he cursed, he saw the last train car pass by to his side.

The train vanished up ahead and a single sight remained for him.

“…!!”

The hundred giant dolls raised telephone poles and signs as they charged in at him.

●

The maid doll lowered down atop the accelerating train.

The wind was so strong that even standing up would blow her away.

“How fast have bullet trains gotten these days?”

As she muttered to herself, the maid doll heard something.

The hundred dolls made from the city had crashed into the elevated train track.

That cut off the power lines and the acceleration came to an end, but the train was still moving plenty fast and it was already on the straight line to the Ikebukuro region.

The maid doll saw what she needed to win in Ikebukuro.

She then checked behind her.

The hundred dolls were a material weapon created by combining V-Sw’s destruction and rebirth with Gram’s writing concept.

She saw those dolls forcefully destroying the elevated track and continuing to run.

A few of them had destroyed themselves by running into the track, but over ninety of them still remained.

The sounds of shattering glass, smashed asphalt, and breaking building materials rang loud.

They came together as a tremor of rushing footsteps and created an advancing force of all-around destruction.

It was a great din.

But the maid doll noticed that the hundred dolls had stopped their advance.

…That means the kid must still be alive.

She made a visual search and indeed found her enemy.

He was no longer on the elevated track. Instead, Izumo flew through the air in his white armored uniform.

He had likely activated a few dozen charms at once to perform a great leap that smashed the elevated track below his feet.

An explosion of water vapor surrounded him in the sky to the east of the track.

The stress this great leap put on his body was apparent even from the outside.

Blood seeped from the base of his clenched teeth and blood spurted from the muscles in his arms that he had torn from overexertion.

All that effort had earned him a brief reprieve at an elevation of one hundred meters.

But the hundred dolls were already running toward his landing spot. They raised their hands toward the sky to seize Izumo's life and raced through the streets even as their movements destroyed their own bodies.

The maid doll realized it was all over.

Izumo would definitely need to catch his breath once he landed. No matter how tough his body was, a one hundred meter leap would have to do some kind of damage.

The dolls would then rush in and perform countless several hundred ton body presses, effectively ending it.

Just as she decided this was as far as it would go, a voice reached her from the sky.

"Hold on there! This isn't even close to over!"

She looked up toward Izumo's voice and saw his white sword had fully opened.

…He's going to make a max power strike?

That seemed like a stupid idea to her. The rules of destruction and rebirth were in effect. V-Sw ruled that power, so destroying the dolls with them would only return them to their original urban form and an attack measured in the hundreds of meters could never destroy every last one of the hundred dolls.

A few of the dolls had noticed Izumo's intention, so they began hopping to the side in repeated feints.

However…

"Hey, I think you're forgetting something important here!"

Izumo swung his great sword in midair, but not at the hundred dolls.

He swung it at the city itself.

He repeatedly struck at the city between Ikebukuro and Shinjuku.

He carved in lines of light that formed writing.

"Do you know what this part of the city is called!? Do you!?"

Izumo made the final stroke to complete the three characters torn into the group of buildings below.

"Ookubo!!"

A moment later, the five hundred square meter section of the city stood up and became Ookubo.

●

As he fell, Izumo looked at the giant hand growing up from the earth.

"Come on out, Ookubo!!"

The district of the city known as Ookubo stood up while taking Waseda University's College of Science along with it. The college's sports ground formed a giant hand that caught Izumo.

Once Ookubo stood up, he was over two hundred meters tall.

Wind wrapped around him and the speed of his rise created explosions of water vapor at different points on his body. When the maid doll saw him, she cried out.

"Who the hell is Ookubo!?"

"How should I know!? I was really hoping I'd get to do this in Kabuki-cho!"

A moment later, Ookubo struck a triumphant pose with Izumo standing on his right palm.

"———!!"

And he roared.

The hundred dolls crashed into his legs, but Izumo ignored them and yelled.

He let out a rough breath and swung up V-Sw.

"Punch them, Ookubo!!"

Ookubo bent over and struck the ground down below.

The left fist smashed the ground, the next strike split the city, and the following ones sent the dolls scattering.

The overwhelming attack noisily broke the dolls to pieces, but the hundred dolls remained resolute.

Without fearing destruction, they began beating on Ookubo's shins with telephone pole bats.

"Bear with it, Ookubo!"

But then they began striking his little toe with telephone pole hammers.

"I know what it's like, Ookubo!! Kick them, Ookubo!"

Ookubo kicked up from below.

The speedy kick had a radius of one hundred meters and the foot at the end easily broke the sound barrier.

The vicinity of Kabuki-cho was thrown into the air in a single strike, the hundred dolls were sent flying by the shockwave, and they destroyed the elevated track or the large buildings around Shinjuku Station as they did. A doll made from an apartment building collided into the Tokyu Building, creating a cascade of broken glass. Another doll flew head-first into the side of the Keio Department Store, sent a café on the upper floors flying out into the air, and broke out the opposite side.

Others rolled along the ground, destroying the city as they did, and turned the entire Shinjuku region into a zone of destruction.

But amid all that noise, the train carrying the maid doll entered Ikebukuro.

Izumo caught his breath on Ookubo's arm and looked north.

While facing the various buildings of Ikebukuro, he pulled his cellphone from his pocket.

And after a moment…

"It's me," said a voice.

"Oh, the idiot, huh? …I'm guessing you'd know better than Chisato, so what kind of land is Ikebukuro?"

"It is my land. It has my name written on it. In my atlas."

"Try a little harder next time. Anyway, I'm in the Shinjuku area right now."

"Yes, Hyakunin-cho and Ookubo-cho are there, aren't they? The dumpling shop in front of Hyakunin-cho's shrine and the soba shop in front of Ookubo Station are both quite delicious."

"We've already used both of those."

"What an odd turn of phrase," said Sayama. "But anyway, Ikebukuro contains Tokyo's famous Sunshine 60. That giant building was built on the site of Sugamo Prison which held war criminals during World War Two. Sounds like a place our enemies would like, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Izumo nodded. "Sorry, I just found something I need to do."

He hung up and faced forward.

He had ended the call for a simple reason.

The tallest building in Ikebukuro and all those around it had suddenly started blasting explosive flames from near their base.

"Oh, c'mon. I have no idea what's going on anymore."

●

The maid doll stood on the Sunshine 60's wall as the setting sun washed over it.

She was supported by her own two legs and Gram which was stabbed into the building's wall.

The sixty story building was shooting smoke from its large-scale ground floor.

That white smoke was the smoke of a launch.

And this was not restricted to the Sunshine 60.

One hundred of the surrounding buildings, hotels, department stores, etc. were all trembling and shattering at the bottom while blasting smoke toward the earth where it spread out and produced great wind and noise.

The structures of reinforced concrete were producing that explosive smoke for a single reason: the words written on Gram.

"Go! Super-Ultra ICBMs!!"

The Sunshine 60 shook in the light of the setting sun.

It vibrated, produced an even louder roar than the surrounding buildings, and slammed smoke into the earth.

The smoke filled the parks in every direction, blew away the cars stopped in the roads, and collided with nearby buildings.

The tremor shattered the high-rise's windows, the resonating roar did the same to the surrounding buildings, and the packaged structures like convenience stores were easily knocked over.

Wind blew and the earth trembled.

"Fly!" shouted the maid doll while writing on Gram with her pen. "Willpower!!"

As soon as the extra word was added, the willpower-driven Super-Ultra ICBM began to float.

The sixty-story building was over two hundred meters tall and it briefly stopped in midair as if hesitating, but…

"———!!"

All of the tallest structures in Ikebukuro, a group of buildings with numbers reaching triple digits, tore free from the foundations binding them to the earth.

With a destructive launch, all of the buildings flew up into the sky in perfect synchronization.

●

A few of the automatons cried out as they viewed their consoles below Kanda.

“Impossible!!”

Dozens of orange lights had appeared on the ceiling map to indicate giant flying objects.

All of them were large missiles made from vertically-rising buildings.

The concrete and glass formed the outer shell and the shops and products inside formed the explosives.

“The city…is flying?” blankly asked one automaton.

#8 nodded.

“Originally, this power could make an entire world fly,” she said. “And this is the power of one of the enemies we fought for so long during the Concept War.”

●

Glass shards scattered like rain at sunset while the buildings loudly accelerated toward the heavens.

They were all wrapped in massive rings of water vapor and they broke through those rings to continue their skyward journey.

An ICBM made its way to extreme high altitude before dropping back to earth.

The maid doll used Gram to stand on the side of the Sunshine 60 as it rose vertically toward the transparent evening sky. With the Prince Hotel, securities building, and other structures accompanying them, it felt like an ascending battleship.

“The weapon that symbolized the Cold War is flying from the place where World War Two ended. Clever, don’t you think?”

The rapidly-moving buildings broke through the clouds.

The massive white and gray objects destroyed the clouds and danced through the sky like a pod of whales leaping from the sea.

The buildings soared up from the clouds and slowly formed their downward-facing trajectories.

They drew parabolic arcs, their hard bodies groaned, and the containers measuring in the hundreds of meters pointed back toward the ground.

They fell straight down.

Their target was Shinjuku, where Izumo was.

To correct their course as they plunged back into the clouds, the maid doll twisted Gram like a joystick.

The buildings responded by surrounding themselves in a thin gust of wind and turning completely upside down.

They faced downwards.

The Sunshine Hotel as well as the Prince Hotel and other buildings began to fall as if eager to continue on.

Crimson light and shimmering heat came from their bases and the tallest building fell with the others joining it.

The elements of one district dropped toward another.

The clouds became a cold mist as they plunged into them.

Once they passed through the other side of the clouds, Shinjuku and the rest of Tokyo came into view.

The tallest missile which took its name from the sun only began to move after seeing the others begin.

And then the massive structure accelerated.

White mist trailed from every corner on the front end as the colossal warhead advanced.

As if pushing on the smaller warheads which had gone on ahead…no, as if greeting them, the representative of Showa era Japan’s architectural technology headed toward Tokyo.

It lined up alongside the Prince Hotel but did not hesitate.

“We’ll be going on ahead.”

The maid doll gave an informal salute and passed the hotel by.

This time, all sixty stories of the giant falling structure were awash with the sunshine for which it was named.

The ground was visible.

Even the distant Imperial Palace could be seen from this height. The cars were stopped, so the exhaust-stained air was washed clean by the wind and the city grew clear.

This city had been firebombed during the war and had grown upwards after the war, so none of its prewar form remained.

On top of that, the Shinjuku region had been destroyed by the previous battle.

But that will end here, thought the maid doll on the side of the building that began to accelerate in its fall.

This one strike would end it all.

He had lost to Kazami during the Army’s attack, but he was stubborn enough to write off what she had said as the ramblings of a child. Those were things he had thought countless times but had never been able to believe.

But, he thought with a small smile of resignation.

“I’ll believe in it a little. …That’ll give what I’m doing here some purpose.”

The fall was truly underway now and the Gs were strong enough to almost blow the maid doll upwards.

But the building continued on.

Pieces of itself, its contents, and smoke scattered from it as the Ikebukuro-launched high-rise building fell toward Shinjuku. It seemed to be announcing that Shinjuku was its rightful place.

Acceleration pushed the fall onward.

The wind blew up from below and produced a deafening roar.

The streets of Shinjuku had already come into view. The setting sun lengthened shadows, but there were no shadows in that torn-up and smashed land.

The maid doll smiled bitterly at the fact that actual dirt was visible.

“There’s nothing wrong with modern days. Cities are the makeup people put on the earth.”

And…

“We were the ones who made all that!!”

They continued down.

The shockwave of impact and the explosion of the massive structure would at least annihilate Shinjuku.

Only the earthen crust would remain.

As long as the maid doll wrote the word “barrier” on Gram just before the explosion, she would be fine.

The building was now less than a kilometer from the surface. Its acceleration continued and would reach its peak in the instant of impact.

…*End it.*

End our war, thought the maid doll.

And in that moment, she saw movement through the wind.

A figure was moving toward the point of impact. The figure was running and destroying Shinjuku in the process.

It was Ookubo.

●

Izumo had Ookubo run to a certain spot.

That was where the ICBMs launched from Ikebukuro would hit.

That spot represented modern Tokyo.

It was Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building.

Izumo had Ookubo come to a rapid stop in front of modern Japan’s tallest building.

A roar filled the air as Ookubo stomped a foot down into an underground mall, gently slid to a stop, and held Izumo out toward the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building.

Izumo lowered his hips to bear with the inertia, but he did not lose sight of his enemy.

The giant shadow was not far above him now.

The shaking of the air was enough to shatter the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building’s windows, but Izumo did not care.

He stared up at the falling object that was so large that it did not seem to be accelerating at all.

“That’s pretty cool.”

He quickly raised his brush. This bladed brush was named V-Sw and held the power of destruction and rebirth.

“But I’m more modern than you!!”

He swung V-Sw again and again.

The front face of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building shattered, concrete and glass flew everywhere, and words took form.

“A real man’s gotta go with one of these!”

●

A shout from the surveillance plane reached the Kanda Laboratory.

“Izumo-sama has finished writing! It says…”

A pause.

“‘Beam Cannon’!!”

●

An electrical discharge raced between the twin towers at the top of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building.

The bluish-white electricity linked in the twilight and created a massive incidence of ball lightning.

The discharge suddenly vanished and only the ball lightning remained.

“———!!”

A moment later, the twin towers of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building shattered.

They did so for two reasons.

The enormous structure falling from above had struck them and a ring of bluish-white light had shot from the ball lightning in every direction.

A light sound filled the air and it sounded a lot like an inhalation.

At the same time, the ball lightning floating between the twin towers grew smaller.

“…!!”

And light from the ball lightning pierced straight through the Sunshine 60 from the roof to the first floor.

Meanwhile, the Sunshine 60 crashed into the top of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building.

“!!”

This created explosive pressure.

Instead of an actual explosion, large-scale pressure spread out and pressed down on the air.

The impact and the exploding ICBM created a great flash of light.

The light enveloped everything.

In it, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building was crushed from above, spread out like a blooming flower, and was swept away by the impact such that not even a fragment remained.

In just an instant, bluish-white light came from all of the Sunshine 60’s windows and then the building was smashed to pieces as if someone had struck it.

The power built up inside exploded which sped up its collapse yet reduced its overall strength.

Nevertheless, it caused wide-scale destruction.

Light instantly covered a radius of several kilometers and everything in range was knocked outward and crushed.

The other falling buildings were hit from below and destroyed, but their midair explosions were swallowed up by the light spreading below which was more than twice as powerful.

There was no sound. The shockwave exceeded the speed of sound.

As that shockwave spread, the dome of light pushed a wave of water vapor ahead.

Before long, the shockwave flew several times farther than the light itself.

The buildings of Shinjuku, Ikebukuro, Shibuya, and the surroundings wards were immediately knocked over, trees flew, and cars and trains blew about as easily as dust.

The clouds above were pushed outward and a wave of luminescence spread through the sky along with a trembling shockwave.

The sound arrived afterwards.

Dozens of loud, deep sounds rumbled together.

“————————”

Light vanished from the blast site and the earth was blown into the air.

The reflected force that crashed into the ground blew away everything there.

This was pure destruction.

Only the earth below remained.

However, something flew through the smoke and dust that had quickly risen to the heavens: two lights.

The surveillance plane had escaped the range of the blast and it now checked on the flying lights while hopping along the high-speed air currents.

Thin trails of light arced through the sky as they flew west, toward the setting sun.

The twin lights flew quickly alongside each other.

They were two swords which had flown from the center of the blast.

They were the Concept Core weapons named Gram and V-Sw.

When the surveillance plane saw the flying lights, an automaton’s voice rang out.

“The battle has ended…”

Some static filled her transmitted voice.

“…in a draw!!”

---

[1] Hyakunin-cho means “City of One Hundred People”, but adding the character meaning “form” makes it “City of One Hundred Dolls”.

Chapter 39

“Empty Roar”

If this is goodbye
Then it is just like thunder during an evening of clear skies

●

Lights began to appear in the city as evening arrived.

It was not long until Christmas and the end of the year.

The sky was a dark mixture of red and purple and the city did its best to illuminate it from below.

Below that light, warmly-dressed people carried a variety of things and cars clogged the streets.

A couple walked through the many footsteps, rumbling engines, speaking voices, and blaring horns.

It was a blonde girl in a jacket and a dark-skinned boy in a black coat.

The girl walked ahead, drawn in by the broiled chestnuts and lotteries at the surrounding stores, and the boy grabbed her collar to pull her back in front of him.

“Heo, don’t wander around so much. You’ll run into someone.”

“H-Harakawa, the city streets are supposed to be an exciting place toward the end of the year.”

“Shut up.”

His breath appeared white in the air as he pulled Heo alongside him.

He then looked down the street, where the train station’s roundabout was located beyond a wide arcade.

“I certainly didn’t think we’d end up wandering around near Hachioji Station. If we’d gone to Harajuku or Shibuya, you could probably have bragged about it to your classmates.”

“It’s entrance exam season for all of us, you know?”

Heo smiled with her eyebrows lowered, so he eventually said “sorry” and nothing else.

But then she raised her eyebrows again while still smiling.

“Aren’t you worried about my entrance exam?”

“Don’t come to my school.”

“That’s just mean! Y-you don’t have to be so blunt!!”

“Shut up. Lately, I’ve been thinking that your disease will get worse if you come to my school.”

She frowned and tilted her head.

“Wh-what disease?”

“The center-of-the-world disease.”

“I thought you were serious for a second, but you’re lying, aren’t you?”

“That’s what everyone with the disease says. The symptoms are doing and saying things others find incomprehensible, having your thoughts tend heavily toward radical directions, and becoming so perverted you lose sight of your surroundings.”

She nodded as she listened and then smiled.

“Are you still going on about that? …Everyone’s like that, aren’t they?”

“That means they’ve all come down with the disease. …It’s probably a moral infection and your initial symptoms are quite severe.”

“Th-then why are you okay!?”

“Most likely, I have moral antibodies. They must be of a type that has yet to be discovered.”

“Th-then.” Heo smiled and clapped her hands. “Please fill me with your moral antibodies!”

The surrounding people stopped walking when they heard her.

She stopped too with her smile frozen on her face.

“Did I just show symptoms again?”

“Just come here,” said Harakawa while dragging her out in front of the station.

The roundabout had been expanded in the past few years and a large-scale parking garage had been built underground.

That was due to the development race with the neighboring cities, but Harakawa did not think about whether that was for the best or not. He felt that was something for the local people to decide.

People looked fondly back on the old days, so in fifty years, they might be looking fondly back on this scenery.

“Harakawa,” said Heo without warning.

He turned around and saw her looking up at the Hachioji Station building and the narrow strip of sky past it.

The light of a surveillance plane could be seen there as it followed their position.

Heo’s expression was calmer than before as she looked up at the flashing red light.

“What is the meaning of this fight?”

“That’s a pretty dangerous thing to say after suddenly looking up into the sky.”

“Y-you’re too realistic, Harakawa.”

“No,” he said while looking up at the same spot. “Once the fight is over, I’ll be the unrealistic one. And that sky belongs to you, Heo.”

She fell silent, but he ignored that and touched the protective necklace his mother had made.

“I will live on while looking fondly upon reality.”

“Y-you can’t do that!”

He turned toward the shout that caused the surrounding people to look over again and he saw Heo with her eyebrows raised.

“You’ll be with me, too. After all…you’re the only I’ll let ride me!”

The surrounding people ground to a halt once more.

After ten seconds passed, the crowd resumed walking while whispering something.

Heo groaned and Harakawa patted her shoulder.

“Try not to speak too much. The symptoms have a way of worsening when you say or do things.”

“Th-then…”

She blushed, hung her head, and pointed at a nearby broiled chestnut stand.

“I’ll be quiet, but…I want that.”

“So you want the food stand? Or is it the old guy running it? Which is it?”

“What the stand is selling.”

“You’ll gain weight.”

“I-if you only look at the result, you miss the fun of the process.”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard someone make logical argument to excuse their overeating.”

Harakawa looked annoyed, but he reached into his pocket and began to pull out his wallet.

“…”

But then a red package was held out in front of him…no, between him and Heo. It was a package of broiled chestnuts.

He did not bother wondering when the person had appeared. He simply faced the fact that she was there.

“Nagata…Tatsumi.”

She wore a brown coat, let out a white breath, and smiled at both him and Heo.

“Have a souvenir. A souvenir of your defeat.”

●

Below Kanda, two red dots appeared on the map of Tokyo displayed on the ceiling.

They were located in Hachioji of western Tokyo.

“Heo-sama, Harakawa-sama, and Tatsumi-sama have begun their battle.”

Hearing that report from the surveillance plane, Ooshiro crossed his arms.

“Are the pairings essentially random?”

“Testament,” replied #8. “Did you want Hiba-sama to fight Tatsumi-sama?”

“No, that would have had a pretty high cruelty coefficient and it would have become a much more personal battle. …If only I could take part.”

“Testament. So you finally wish to die. Congratulations. That is a wise decision.”

“Wow, you’re not even going to try to comfort me!?”

He scratched his head and sighed.

“But I do have a photograph of Tatsumi-kun from when she was living with the Hiba family. I could have used that to negotiate.”

“In other words, you were taking secret photos of her?”

Without even waiting for him to respond, #8 grabbed the collar of his lab coat.

“Excuse me! Is anyone here a police officer!?”

“Wait!” shouted Ooshiro while waving his hands back and forth.

At the same time, a somewhat weak-sounding voice arrived from the surveillance plane.

“The battle…is over.”

“…!?”

Even the automatons at the consoles reacted in surprise.

They looked around in confusion and found one of the red dots had vanished from the map on the ceiling, leaving just the one.

A few of them frowned as they reviewed the data arriving from the surveillance plane.

Most notably, they were looking at the elapsed time.

“It seems…”

A quiet voice filled the Kanda Laboratory.

“It seems the battle only lasted…12.04 seconds.”

●

The battle was composed of a series of instants.

The very first move was made by Heo’s voice.

“Thunder Fellow!”

Almost as soon as the concept space expanded, a giant mechanical dragon appeared behind Heo and Harakawa.

He had only just appeared, so he had yet to combine with the Vesper Cannon. The cannon was stored as one of his frames, but he needed to reach a certain altitude before combining with it.

They had not summoned Thunder Fellow ahead of time because he used power even in standby mode. To lower his reactor’s power, he needed to return to his concept space and rest.

His summoning was instantaneous, so this was not a real problem. In fact, it was helpful because it allowed them to store up his power to a certain extent.

…Let’s win this.

Heo’s desire for victory was the natural thought for someone with a mechanical dragon form. She knew she was the greatest power of Team Leviathan and of the Low-Gear representatives.

And a moment later, both Thunder Fellow and Tatsumi took action.

Thunder Fellow immediately brought Heo and Harakawa inside his cockpit while Tatsumi drew a long Japanese-style Cowling Sword from her back.

●

After boarding Thunder Fellow with Heo, Harakawa had a certain thought: where was Typhon?

This concept space contained 5th-Gear and 3rd-Gear’s concepts. The god of war named Typhon had no will of its own, but Tatsumi’s remote control would work better here than in Low-Gear’s normal environment.

However, the answer came from a surprising location: Tatsumi’s hands.

While her right hand held the sword’s hilt, her left held a cup of Bizarre Crybaby Cherry Blossom sake.

Thus, she was not remotely controlling Typhon at the moment.

…Where has she hidden it!?

Harakawa had Thunder Fellow keep up a continuous scan of Tatsumi’s left hand. If she let go of the cup, he wanted to know about it.

The very next moment, Heo was absorbed by Thunder Fellow and Harakawa had Thunder Fellow back away.

However, he did not leap back.

“Fire the main canon!! Use the recoil to put some distance between us!”

The main cannon was only at half power, but that was more than enough for a human target.

And it then fired that “more than enough” power.

The beam of light shot from Thunder Fellow’s mouth and his giant form was blown backwards.

“Hit her!!”

His words gave form to his desire.

The light flew in a straight line and did indeed strike the individual standing on the roundabout.

However, it did not hit her directly; it instead hit the Cowling Sword in her hand.

“Harakawa! That sword is the one Hiba’s dad was using in that dream we saw!”

Heo and Harakawa stopped Thunder Fellow in front of a building across from the roundabout and checked on the situation.

Tatsumi’s blade created an arcing silver afterimage. It had wholly absorbed the light from Thunder Fellow’s main cannon.

It happened in an instant.

There was no sound and no wind. Even the light and power had vanished, leaving only the scorching afterimage behind.

Tatsumi stood with her sword lowered in her right hand and her cup of sake in her left hand.

And after the instant passed, Heo spoke quietly.

“Come to think of it, those chestnuts are…”

“Yeah,” confirmed Harakawa.

He looked forward and saw the red package sitting on the cockpit’s main console even though they hadn’t taken it.

Tatsumi had to have given it to them while they were boarding the dragon.

During the next instant, Tatsumi swung her right hand. She reversed her wrist and snapped it upwards.

The long Cowling Sword drew an arc much like a swinging scythe.

It was coming.

Both Harakawa and Heo knew Hiba's father's sword could release enough power to easily slice through a building.

And here, they realized how that worked.

"That sword absorbs any power that hits it and then releases it!!"

Without bothering to agree with Heo's conclusion, Harakawa made a quick decision: he flew.

He moved up and to the left to avoid the pressure flying from Tatsumi's raised right arm. He used the dragon's pressurizers to quickly ascend.

Typhon was not coming at the moment because Tatsumi's remote control hand still held the cup, so their enemy had no aerial ability.

"Thunder Fellow! Prepare the Vesper Cannon!"

After flying upwards, they had space below the dragon for the Concept Core cannon.

That weapon was stored in Thunder Fellow's concept space as one of his frames.

They only had to continue upwards and then fire back down to win. The sword might be an obstacle, but the shockwave and heat that a wide-range blast created around her would be enough.

And only an instant later, Tatsumi's slash arrived.

She had transformed Thunder Fellow's main cannon into pressure fired from her sword.

"————!"

For the first time, Harakawa and Heo saw the light of their main cannon from head-on.

However, they had already calculated out its trajectory.

Thunder Fellow flew up and to the left in order to avoid the diagonal slash.

But an instant later, an unexpected attack hit the mechanical dragon.

It had not come from Tatsumi's sword. It had come from a completely unexpected direction.

"Harakawa! Directly above!!"

Heo gave her warning just before it crashed into Thunder Fellow's top surface.

It felt like the entire machine was struck from above and Harakawa bounced around in the cockpit.

His chest slammed into the console and he heard a few of his bones creaking.

"…!? What hit us hard enough to get through Thunder Fellow's inertial defenses!?"

He read the warning message from Thunder Fellow flashing on the console.

There was severe damage to the upper armor and joints. And it had been caused by…

"————"

Harakawa looked up to check.

He looked back through the canopy and saw what had fallen on top of the dragon.

"Harakawa! It's Typhon!"

He could see it for himself.

On top of the blue mechanical dragon, Typhon had Keravnos attached to its left arm with blue chains.

"She wasn't controlling Typhon! It was simply falling from extreme high altitude! She had predicted what we would do, so she didn't need to control it!"

Harakawa gasped and then he saw Typhon moving.

Light filled the white giant's eyes as it stood up despite the impact having destroyed all of its armor.

At the same time, Thunder Fellow's voice filled his mind.

"Tatsumi has finished her sake and threw the cup in a trash can, Harakawa!"

"She has time for that!?"

Anger filled Harakawa as he forcibly swung Thunder Fellow to the right.

He was trying to shake Typhon off of them, but the god of war flew forward itself. It spread its wings and made its way toward the roundabout.

He faced forward and saw Tatsumi with her empty left hand raised.

"Now, it's time I finished this."

As soon as her voice and smile reached him, Thunder Fellow summoned his weapon.

The concept space hangar opened and the mechanical dragon took out his Concept Core cannon.

●

Heo saw it play out in an instant.

Her body came apart below her stomach and the frame pulled away.

At the same time, Typhon landed behind Tatsumi.

Tatsumi would not have time to climb on top of the god of war and fly toward them.

The damage from Typhon's collision had robbed them of their instantaneous speed, but it was still enough to fly up into the air and achieve subsonic speeds.

As soon as Tatsumi stepped onto Typhon's hand, Thunder Fellow's removed frame was stored in his concept space and a forty meter cannon came out to replace it.

The process took more than an instant. It required a full breath.

But that was still enough. They had time for it to connect and then fire on their approaching enemy.

But a moment later, Heo saw something else.

Typhon quickly swung up the right arm Tatsumi stood on.

"…Eh?"

Heo knew what the god of war had done, but it took her a moment to understand what it meant.

Typhon had thrown Tatsumi with all its might

…What is she-…?

"Heo!!"

Thunder Fellow's voice brought Heo back to her senses.

She looked forward where Tatsumi had been thrown like an underhand line drive. She flipped around in midair and calmly raised her sword toward the dragon.

She flew toward them like a bladed shell.

But what was she going to do?

Her sword had no power stored inside it, so it was unlikely enough to slice through Thunder Fellow's armor.

But as Heo saw Tatsumi smile and heard her laugh, she also heard Harakawa's voice.

"Put the Vesper Cannon away!!"

"Wh-why!? We aren't using a power her sword can absorb."

"We are!" he shouted. "We're using a destructive power right this moment! And she's trying to absorb it!"

That power was…

"The power to open a concept space! The power to tear through space!!"

●

Tatsumi immediately spun around and used her midair rotation to swing her blade.

She was positioned just below Thunder Fellow's right side.

She had gotten the timing just right: just after the Vesper Cannon was ejected and just before the concept space hangar closed.

Opening a concept space required a power that transformed space and Tatsumi sliced into that power.

"!"

She heard a sound much like shattering glass and felt the blow land.

The sword blade glowed dully to show it had gained a new power.

A moment later, she twisted her body and used the power she had only just received.

"…!!"

She poured it all into Thunder Fellow.

She made a horizontal slash. Even she had difficulty keeping steady after being thrown through the air at such great speed. It was enough for her body to cry out in protest.

However, she clenched her teeth and raised her eyebrows because this was worth it.

Thunder Fellow had already removed his frame and he was taking evasive actions to put some distance between them, so if she missed this chance…

…I won't get another one!

That thought forced her sword along.

"Seyahhh!!"

She had never let even Mikoku hear her put that much force behind her voice. She primarily fought by receiving attacks, but she actually released power from herself and it produced a clear result: space opened up.

That was her sword's power now.

"_____"

With a sound like a brass instrument being struck, the entrance to some other space was cut open.

It opened like a book and darkness was visible on the other side.

The spatial hole fired by her sword grew to the proper size to swallow its foe: the mechanical dragon attempting to take evasive action.

Without the support of its frame, the dragon failed to move in time and it was swallowed whole.

Thunder Fellow vanished into that foreign space in what seemed like no time at all.

Only air remained and the Vesper Cannon fell to the ground.

However, that was not all.

Just before Thunder Fellow had been swallowed up, he had fired lightning toward Tatsumi.

It was a desperate attack.

She trembled at the strike made even as the dragon's defeat was certain.

…*That's right.*

Also, Thunder Fellow had sent two people from his cockpit and to the ground.

One or maybe both of them had fired that final attack.

…*A desperate attempt at taking me down with them.*

She then wondered if her true enemy could do that much.

The lightning approached, but she did nothing.

The reason why was obvious.

She had lost control, continued rotating from the excess force of her slash, and crashed into the window of a building across from the roundabout.

In the moment of impact, she absorbed the shock with her back, but the glass shattered before she could finish.

The lightning struck the building's outer wall and knocked Tatsumi into the building.

●

After falling to the ground next to the roundabout, Heo had lost everything except for her own breath.

"Thunder Fellow…"

She called out quietly, but no one answered her.

She simply looked up into the stars in the night sky.

She knew why this had happened.

Thunder Fellow had been absorbed by the spatial slice Tatsumi had hijacked.

He had the ability to eject his stored parts, but he needed for Heo to call out to him if he was to leave the concept space himself. And that only applied to the space that existed between him and her.

But now, that power had been absorbed by Tatsumi's sword and used to send him into a spatial slice not under his control.

"He won't come out…even if I call for him…"

Her vision blurred as she spoke.

"I lost…so he…!"

What have I done? she thought. The words "careless", "thoughtless", and "failure" filled her mind and she could instinctually feel her defeat.

Her tears were proof enough of that.

"No…"

The dispute between Low-Gear and Top-Gear had been riding on this battle and she thought about what it meant to have lost. Also…

…*Thunder Fellow won't appear anymore even if I call for him?*

The power that supported her had been lost and defeated due to her own carelessness.

That double sense of fear filled her stomach with a bitter feeling and sent a tremble down her spine.

She got up to suppress the tremor and saw something like a gravestone sticking out of the roundabout.

It shined in the roundabout's lights.

"The Vesper Cannon…"

She then realized she was at Typhon's feet and that someone sat in the fourth floor window of the building beyond the Vesper Cannon and the roundabout.

Tatsumi shrugged from the broken windowsill with a trail of blood on the right side of her forehead.

She smiled, let out a white breath, and rested the Cowling Sword on her shoulder.

"It's too bad you won't get to bring the chestnuts back with you."

Heo was shocked by Tatsumi's words because she had lost something much more important than that.

She realized that the victor simply could not understand, more tears spilled out with each breath she took, and she thought about protesting Tatsumi's words.

But she suddenly felt her vision going dark.

…*Ah*.

She realized the emptiness in her heart was greater than the protest in her heart.

She began to pass out as everything settled down into that emptiness.

She knew she could not allow herself to do that and that she would be fleeing responsibility in doing so, but…

"Heo."

She heard a voice from behind.

"Get some rest. And have faith that it'll all be okay."

Those were the words she most wanted to hear, but the ones she simply could not believe. However, she also felt arms wrap around her to embrace her from behind.

"You can share the responsibility with me, so…take this time to rest."

She did not want to agree to that. Harakawa was in charge of piloting and attacking, but she was the one actually making Thunder Fellow move. She had been careless in a number of ways, which had led to this result, so she did not want to leave any of the responsibility with him.

But…

"It's okay. I'm telling you to do it."

When she heard those words, she finally passed out.

She apologized but also thanked him as she fell into the shadows.

And as her vision sank into darkness, she wondered if Thunder Fellow was seeing something similar.

Chapter 40

“Two Powers”

Whenever I look up into the sky, I take a breath
How can that power fly
Even though no one supports it?

●

A single object floated above the twilit city.

The long, almond-shaped white object was an advertisement airship. The side of its fifty meter body was emblazoned with an ad for the recently released film “Sylvester Wars IV: Friendship Strikes Back”. It depicted a starry background with two macho men throwing aside their electromagnetic swords to duke it out with their fists.

It also played some audio clips.

“What!? The Dark Lord’s punch measures in at more than one ton per centimeter!?”

“The Force! Use the Force, Rocky!!”

Invisible from the ground, another form stood on the airship.

It was a girl with wings of light.

The insignia on her white armored uniform read “Kazami”.

She had set a white spear and a long bag to the side and looked to the cellphone in her hand.

“So Kaku tied and Heo lost. This says Kaku destroyed Shinjuku, so how is he still alive?”

She sighed.

…One tie and one loss.

“I need to win this. …I have some ideas, but maybe I should ask someone about it.”

She nodded, called a recorded number, and held the phone to her ear.

“It is I.”

“Oh, it’s the idiot,” she replied.

“What? This girl clearly does not understand my value.”

“Are you being sexist?”

“In that case…” Sayama rephrased himself. “What? This boy clearly does not understand my value.”

“That isn’t what I meant!!”

“You do not like being called a girl, but you do not like being called a boy either? …Do you live in some kind of fantasy world?”

“Y’know, is that really something Shinjou’s boyfriend should be saying?”

“Yes. Shinjou-kun *is* criminally cute.”

He’s hopeless, sighed Kazami. And…

…Something must have happened.

She glared forward and gave a nod of understanding.

“Well, try to get along. …Oh, but without committing any crimes.”

“Not to worry. That just means I have to avoid being caught.”

“Die.”

She hung up before realizing, *Oops.*

She had called in order to mentally prepare herself for victory.

…And I probably should have said something about next term’s student council.

That may not have been something to discuss here, but it was possible she could die in this battle.

And the school was about the only thing she had to speak with Sayama about when UCAT was excluded.

Outside of school and UCAT, he was an underclassman with no connection to her personal life.

What would this be to a normal student? she wondered. *Maybe it wouldn’t be all that different.*

She had given up club activities, having stupid fun afterschool, and playing around back at home, but she had earned a workplace at UCAT instead.

Whichever one she chose, she would probably want the other.

Her work on the student council was quite fun.

When arranging the budgets for the clubs and committees, she would ultimately get heated up and beat them down.

When festival preparations or talks with various representatives were not going well, she would ultimately get heated up and beat them down.

When clubs and committees could not agree on who got to use the schoolyard and classrooms during a vacation, she would once again ultimately get heated up and beat them down.

She would always tell them the same thing:

“Listen. I’m about to hit you! But it isn’t because I don’t like you! I’m going to hit you because I want to hit you!!”

That’s generally how it works, she accepted while putting her cellphone in her pocket.

“Ahh… Waiting for the enemy to show up is so boring.”

Immediately, a blast of red light blew up the airship.

●

Alex held a box below his stomach.

The white, knife-shaped box was three meters long and less than a meter wide and tall.

…This is Wanambi's transportation pallet!

The cables attached to the base allowed Wanambi to communicate with the outside world, but all of them were currently connected to Alex.

This provided him with calculation power that exceeded that of any Gear's machines.

"I now have the most precise learning and predictive ability!! In other words, I am now an excellent student and forecaster!!"

Alex flew.

Shinjuku's sky had been transformed onto a concept space and he accelerated full-throttle toward the smoke left by the destroyed airship.

He arced upwards and observed the smoke ahead.

"I can predict that she is still alive!!"

A moment later, the white smoke dispersed before he could charge into it.

A pressure produced within pushed the smoke out and blew it away.

"I knew it!"

A light rose into the sky ahead of him.

It was a white light.

It was Kazami's light as she spread her wings a bit, grabbed G-Sp2, and ascended.

Despite the sky's scarlet hue, the white light had no problem asserting its presence.

That was the proof of its great acceleration and the power of flight it produced.

…Can I match her acceleration!?

Alex's armor and weaponry were powerful, but their great size and weight hurt his mobility. As an aerial mechanical dragon, his top speed was greater than any other weapon, but his acceleration fell behind the lighter Kazami.

However, Wanambi's predictions gave him his answer.

"Can do it" "OK" "Not a problem" "Accelerators" "Full throttle" "All out" "Willpower" "Reticent" "Titan"

If he listened for too long, the answer would stray from the prediction. He ignored Wanambi's curious words and lit up every single accelerator he had.

The pressurizing sensation was much like the joy of taking the first step.

He briefly started forward and then felt something holding him in place.

The acceleration was initially used to try to push his great weight, but once it exceeded his weight, the additional speed would propel him forward.

His body slowly started moving, but…

"Oh!"

He suddenly shot upward, toward the heavens.

Just as he thought he heard himself smash through the wind, his accelerating eyes saw the scarlet sky.

The sky was vast, but the tremor of his acceleration passed from his nose and down his back as if he were breaking through that sky.

There was no sound of wind.

Gravity simply vanished and he seemed to uncontrollably fall upwards.

Some pale stars were visible in the sky.

The only sound was the mechanical creaking of his trembling body and he saw a single light ahead of him.

That one light was ascending toward the darkening scarlet sky, so he attacked.

●

A voice from the surveillance plane in charge of Kazami's concept space reached the Kanda Laboratory.

"Alex-sama has locked onto Kazami-sama! They are currently ascending vertically…and he will catch up in twenty-seven seconds!"

"Oh?" said Ooshiro while munching on a rice cracker. "Not bad."

He ignored #8's glare and continued speaking.

“Is this the first time Chisato-kun has come across someone as fast as her?”

●

Kazami realized the enemy was going to catch up to her by force.

…Wanambi!?

The answer that Concept Core’s calculations had reached was bad news for her.

After all, she was bad at science, so there was nothing she could do if she was attacked from that end of things.

The attack arrived soon thereafter.

As soon as she felt something like a presence or murderous intent, she used all her strength to flip around.

“…!!”

But she stopped.

She stopped her evasive actions because of the keyword “calculations”.

She had felt it would be dangerous to respond as she normally did.

In that instant, a red pillar of light swept upwards through the space she had just about flown into.

She felt heat, wind, power, and surprise at having her reaction so perfectly predicted.

But just as she thought this would fill her with at least a little bit of tension…

“Not bad!”

As she spoke, she looked down and saw Alex, the mechanical dragon painted in bright red, white, and blue.

“Well!? What do you think about my Deadly Wanambi Technique! My rented predictions are unbeatable!”

Kazami tried to say something in return, but…

“Right now! According to my predictions, you are just about to say ‘Kiii! I can’t stand it! I’ll never forgive you!!’ ”

“Why would I ever say that!?”

“Ha ha ha!! You’re panicking because I guessed what your evil heart was going to say, aren’t you!?”

“I have a feeling you’re a lot like an underclassman of mine.”

“Does this underclassman have a heart of justice?”

“No, he’s the evil mastermind who somehow manages to be sexist towards women and men at the same time.”

“Has he never heard the saying ‘ladies first’!? He is a disgrace even to the name of evil!!”

“You can disgrace evil?”

Kazami twisted her body into horizontal flight and accelerated.

“Ah, wait! I am not done speaking of justice!”

She wanted to avoid paying attention to his idiocy. It could be contagious.

After putting an instant’s worth of space between them, she breathed a sigh of relief.

However, he was going to catch up eventually.

…Dammit.

His acceleration relied on his mechanical form while hers was powered by the Concept Core.

She was small, but that would give her the advantage in thrust and weight. However, there was one big reason why he would still catch up.

“I’m human.”

No matter how much protection her human body received, it could only endure so much. Her body could not keep up with her acceleration and, if she passed the limit, she would probably be thrown out into the sky.

Meanwhile, he had a mechanical body and thus lacked that limit.

She had the better acceleration and mobility, but he had the better top speed.

…This is like a race between a motorcycle and a car.

She checked behind herself using the mirror on the side of the console and realized Alex was catching up to her.

However…

“He didn’t attack during our previous chat.”

That meant the prediction and learning system did not have greater access to his actions than he did himself.

He likely accesses Wanambi when he saw it necessary and simply borrowed its power.

…Instead of putting the Concept Core in control, he’s treating it like a partner.

A good decision, she decided while watching him approach from behind.

“He’s a dangerous enemy, but I might be able to manage!”

She pulled down her goggles and twisted the accelerator.

They accelerated below the darkening sky and above spreading snow clouds.

The wielder of the spear and the mechanical dragon raced in a straight line.

●

“Kazami-sama and Alex-sama have begun their battle! They are currently headed west!”

A surveillance plane flew low in the sky.

Clouds were appearing overhead and details of the situation reached the plane through them.

The speed of the battle had grown too great for visual confirmation and the surveillance plane could not hope to keep up.

It flew as quickly and desperately westward as possible, but someone sighed inside.

It was the automaton viewing the concept power readings that were changing moment by moment.

“Wanambi’s calculations are being used again and again and 8th-Gear’s Concept Core turns heat into life activity, so the shellfire and explosions are automatically following Kazami-sama with serpentine movements.”

But…

“Why isn’t Kazami-sama being shot down?”

An impressed sigh accompanied that pure question of a machine.

Alex was trying to shoot down Kazami using conceptual homing attacks and using the greatest calculation power of any world which likely exceeded the automatons’ own.

The constantly fired attacks were likely using Wanambi’s predictive and learning abilities, but Kazami was still alive. Even as she was pursued and enveloped by attacks, she survived.

And yet the difference in weaponry meant a single hit would be instant death.

“Why?”

“I have determined that is a mystery,” replied the pilot automaton. “But they possess a power with which machines like us cannot equip ourselves.”

●

Kazami fought.

Even as she was pursued, attacked, and relentlessly fired upon, she did not stop fighting.

She chose to evade her enemy’s attacks in countless ways. She made sure that her actions did not fall into a pattern, that her trajectory did not become fixed, and that she could overturn any predictions that were made.

She opened the bag on her back and pulled out a machinegun.

G-Sp2 was a spear, so it could not attack behind her. Aware of that flaw, she had brought this equipment from UCAT.

The bullets she scattered while vibrating had their attack power strengthened, but…

“They still don’t work!?”

Sparks flew from Alex’s armor, but the blue and white panels did not even dent or bend.

Alex returned fire with his secondary cannons.

A pair of red streaks flew from each shoulder and the light pursued her like snakes.

She reflexively danced through the air.

She grabbed just the right grip and sent her entire body flying forward.

“…!!”

She threw herself off course so that she and G-Sp2 flew in a direction not even she could predict.

She then pulled G-Sp2 in close and repeated the process.

She hopped through the air and the red lights homed in on the spot she had just left.

…It predicted that!?

It was learning. A single evasion was not going to cut it anymore. It would statistically determine which direction she would send herself and use the data on the air currents to predict the evasive course that not even she could guess at.

Next time, two evasions might not be enough, she realized. But…

…But not to worry.

She had no basis for that. She simply had zero intention of giving up.

After all, she was riding G-Sp2 which was 10th-Gear’s Concept Core weapon.

The previous night, Izumo had told her about G-Sp2’s origin.

It was the first time he had told her about it.

A civil war had broken out within 10th-Gear, so the head god and those loyal to him had attempted to reestablish their rule by extracting the Concept Core and making a weapon out of it.

That was when Izumo’s grandfather had arrived from Low-Gear after having witnessed 6th-Gear’s destruction.

Izumo’s grandfather had gained the right to speak with the gods by wielding 6th-Gear’s Concept Core weapon.

The goddess who had shown him around had also been a priestess and she had lamented the head god and others' desire for control, but as the Concept Core had begun to take form as Thor's Hammer, 9th-Gear had stolen it via an underground organization.

The gods had suspected the priestess and Izumo's grandfather were escaping their responsibility, so Izumo's grandfather had gone and taken back the stolen Thor's Hammer.

But the civil war had continued and both sides had fought to take possession of the Concept Core weapon as it was made anew.

10th-Gear's underground organization had sent 10th-Gear's concepts out of control as a dragon that devoured the world tree which doubled as the gods' home.

The gods whose duty it was to continue to fight had given Izumo's grandfather a new concept weapon and ordered him fell the world tree. If he did that, that world would be destroyed, but their pathetic fight and the shame of their own kind would be unable to spread to the other Gears.

And thus the world of the gods had been destroyed and the divine spear had been in Izumo's grandfather's possession.

"…"

Kazami wondered why the gods had wished for destruction over something as small as shame.

She did not understand, but perhaps that was because she was human. And in that case, did *he* think that way since he was part god?

They had been unable to seal the majority of 10th-Gear's Concept Core in the divine spear, so it had become a divine dragon, appeared in Low-Gear, and been sealed there.

The divine spear had been completed as G-Sp and later remade as G-Sp2, a modern form that better fit Kazami.

All of that told her one thing.

…That world was passed on and it ended up with me.

That world had been destroyed, but if it had not, she never would have met him and she would not be who she was today.

Wonderful, she thought. *Simply wonderful.*

She had to make sure the survivors of the destroyed would see it that way. She had to make sure they knew that she and her teammates were at their best because those survivors had experienced that destruction. If she did that, would they feel proud of it?

She recalled 10th-Gear's conceit that Jord had shown at the trial and vote the day before.

It seemed ridiculous, but what she had said allowed Kazami to think something else now.

…Those of us who weren't destroyed are sure to make this more fun.

And she held the power to do just that.

She had been saved by that power countless times and used it to save others countless times.

…So I won't lose.

She had the upper hand in several ways.

"So I won't lose!"

With that shout, she began to move.

Alex's secondary cannons were spewing light, so she evaded.

But she evaded a second time, evaded yet another time, and finally avoided the red beams of light.

"———!!"

Suddenly, she did something Alex was unable to predict: she fully opened the wings on her back.

She raised her air resistance and slammed into a wall of air, which caused two things.

First, the wings of light shattered and new ones were created.

Second, her speed greatly fell.

And she used both those results to collide with Alex as he approached from behind.

●

The movements in midair created two extremes.

First, as Kazami just about collided with Alex, she flipped behind him while tightly holding both of G-Sp2's grips.

When her flip pointed the spear down, she fired on him.

However, Alex did not allow it.

He bent his mechanical body downwards to force his trajectory in that direction.

"Shocking Comets! Alex Circus Special!!"

Alex's upper armor panels opened and fired a veritable wall of missiles.

He continued to shout.

“I can only call that naïve!!”

Even as the wind swept at the missiles, they continued up and toward Kazami who flipped by overhead.

The group of warheads approached, so she reacted.

“G-Sp2! Second form!!”

There was no time lag for the shift to cannon mode, but it had yet to build up its power. The attack simply closed the back end and redirected the light coming from there.

Light spread out like a burner, but that proved perfect for hitting all of the missiles at once.

However, it lacked strength and several dozen warheads rose past the explosive flames.

Each and every one of them would be deadly. These weapons were not meant to be used on humans, but they were meant for combat all the same.

And so Kazami used a similar power.

Without rushing, she calmly used a single hand to pull the machinegun from her back.

While flipping, she used her right arm to spray G-Sp2’s light and her left to place the machinegun below her arm.

“…!!”

As she flipped away, she fired toward the approaching warheads and toward Alex.

She fought back while flapping a new set of the wings that would continue to appear as long as she remained conscious.

The vibrations of the machinegun under her arm reached her heart as reassuring music.

The sound rang out and shook her entire body.

“Continue to play, you supreme projectile musical notes!!”

The beating drum of explosions answered her cry, but the heat of those explosions became life in this concept space.

The explosive life vanished almost immediately in the chill of their high altitude, but they still became a swarm of crimson and black butterflies that blotted out the sky.

Kazami finished her flip as those dark flames approached.

“!!”

She threw away the machinegun and shifted G-Sp2 into its third form.

She was not looking at the approaching explosive flames.

“Your back end is wide open!!”

She looked to Alex’s pressurizers and tail.

The positions of offense and defense had reversed.

Despite the remaining warheads and flames flying her way, Kazami twisted the accelerator.

She used her full body to keep the tip of the spear from jerking upwards from the acceleration and she shot forward.

She closed her wings and pursued the mechanical dragon in a straight line.

She passed through the arcing flames and continued to accelerate.

●

The automatons in the surveillance plane could see the two pairs of wings once the clouds were blown away and the sky opened up.

The mechanical dragon flew in the lead at extreme high speed while Kazami followed with light trailing after her.

The missiles’ flames followed Kazami like living creatures and attempted to roast her, but that pair of wings flipped around and danced to avoid them.

More attacks came into view.

Evening had ended, night had begun, and the moon had entered the sky.

The chilly moonlight shined on the two pairs of wings as they exchanged attacks.

Kazami fired her cannon and flipped around, while Alex fired his secondary cannons and missiles.

The wings of light seemed to draw spirals before suddenly moving straight upwards in pursuit of the mechanical dragon.

The dragon flipped around time and again, lowered his speed, and tried to get behind Kazami, but she would shatter her own wings to slam on the brakes and prevent it.

The projectiles of heat pursued Kazami’s wings like living creatures, but a shattering sound filled the sky.

The sound of cannon fire, of slicing through the wind, of explosions, and of shattering wings all mixed together.

“This is the sound of the battle’s own will,” blankly muttered the pilot automaton. “Can you see it?”

She sent footage of the battle to all of the automatons via her shared memory.

Wings of light attempted to draw in and grasp a mechanical dragon while also attacking again and again.

Her movements were tricky and she was exposed to danger countless times, but she did not give up.

She remade herself and cast aside her old self so very many times.

The breaking and shattering wings were a form of self-rebirth.

“Can you see the power of hope that exceeds any predictions?”

The automaton spoke while watching Kazami’s blasts of light pierce the sky and reveal her will to fight.

“The power to never give up hope in oneself is battling the mechanical dragon of heat and calculation speed!”

●

Alex had a thought as he made his predictions.

…I cannot lose.

He continued thinking.

…Justice cannot lose!!

Justice was something his parents had taught him.

In Top-Gear, his parents had helped design mechanical dragons inside Noah.

They had always been busy, so he had often been alone at their home inside Noah.

He remembered it well.

The Nagata family, Tatsumi’s parents, had also helped with those designs, so he had often spoken with her.

She had been strong even then, but she had been hesitant in her strength.

It was always him who stopped her from going too far when she would fight to protect her underclassmen.

He had succeeded a few times, but he had once failed to stop her and been injured.

That was the first time he had seen her cry and she had told him not to worry about her.

But he had shaken his head.

…That is not what a hero would do.

When he was little, his parents left him with videos and books about heroes to give him something to do when he was alone. The people in those stories had fought to protect the world and…

…To protect their own little pieces of happiness.

When Tatsumi had first cried, he too had cried because he had made a girl cry, something a hero must never do. They had cried together and worried the automaton that managed Noah.

So after that, he had decided he would become a true hero and make sure he never made anyone cry.

But then the world had been destroyed.

His parents had been developing a mechanical dragon inside Noah, but they had run out of strength after sending it to the gate opened to Low-Gear.

There had been a few survivors, but Tatsumi had been taken in by UCAT and his own body had been badly damaged by the negative concepts, leaving him with little time left by the time he met up with Hajji and the others.

But Tatsumi’s parents had combined him with the mechanical dragon his parents had created.

They had asked him if he was willing to become a mechanical dragon and he had said yes.

He had said he would become a hero.

His answer had immediately taken form, but Tatsumi’s parents and the others had been damaged by the negative concepts and had died just as they finished the combination surgery. Tatsumi had met up with them a few days later.

In the present, Alex flew through the air and felt Tatsumi’s presence nearby.

She had never shown any tears since that one time.

By the time they had reunited, she had given his mechanical form an aloof and bitter smile and said he had finally become stronger than her.

…No.

He knew that was not the case.

A hero could not exist alone. He knew that all too well after studying what his parents had given him and experiencing it for himself.

A hero existed between the self that protected something and the others that witnessed it.

He had believed that all this time.

He had vaguely wondered a number of things. Were there others who should have been kept alive instead of him?

Should one of Tatsumi’s parents have survived instead?

If they had, would Tatsumi actually have opened her heart and cried?

“But…”

But, he thought.

But I alone held justice in my heart.

That was the one clear difference between himself and any other. That was his value.

He cared for the people of that world that was no more and for the people of this world.

And his thoughts for them contained an absolute justice.

Without that, he would have rotted away.

And one day, his body would fall apart. He had not escaped the power of the negative concepts by changing bodies. His death sentence had simply been delayed.

But falling apart and rotting away were different. It was his mechanical body that contained only a mind that allowed him to think that. He could stand to have his body fall apart and his mind disperse as long as his will did not rot away.

Could the justice of someone with a rotten will stop someone from crying?

“That is right.”

I will not lose, he thought. *Yes. After all…*

“Justice will not lose!”

With those words, he attacked Kazami who approached from behind.

With the desire to never lose filling his mechanical heart, he fired.

●

Alex saw Kazami flip upwards to avoid his right secondary cannon.

He fired a homing attack from his left secondary cannon, but she held G-Sp2 in just her right arm and launched herself downwards to avoid it.

The forced course change shattered her wings.

Alex fired missiles where she fell.

But without opening new wings, she twisted the accelerator with her left hand.

She took an upward trajectory that would bring her above him from behind.

The air currents and what he had learned over the course of the battle allowed him to predict her movements.

So he ascended after her.

He heard her gasp behind him, but he had predicted that as well.

He swung up his tail to strike her from below.

She flipped to the right because she held G-Sp2 in her right hand.

Alex moved.

He used the inertia of his raised tail to roll forward.

“!!”

The forty meter mechanical dragon curled up and rolled once through the air.

On his back, he pulled his jaw back, looked up into the sky, and opened his mouth.

“Prepare main cannon!!”

He fired his main cannon as Kazami ascended.

A solid sound raced through the air and a line of red burned the sky.

A valley was torn into the clouds and the scorched air produced light.

“…!?”

But when Alex looked ahead of the main cannon blast, he found Kazami was gone.

“Wha-…?”

As soon as he spoke, he saw where the enemy was: right in front of him.

With her wings lost, she had made a single decision.

She had made the final move her mobility and decision-making left her.

“You did nothing!?”

“That’s right. I continued fighting without ever giving up this whole time, didn’t I? That shifted your learning and predictions in that direction, so I knew choosing to do nothing at all would catch you off guard. But…”

She gave a small smile.

“I also set up a little trick using 10th-Gear’s power.”

Alex’s sight devices saw the explosions and blasts of light behind her remain in the chilly air without vanishing. And…

“That’s 10th-Gear’s healing power. Now have a taste of your own medicine.”

She immediately twisted out of the way of the missiles and blasts of light that continued to pursue her after she healed them. She also raised G-Sp2 which had returned it to its first form.

It instantly shifted to its third form and became a spear meant to pierce its enemy.

The attack was coming.

And the missiles struck him as a lead-in to G-Sp2.

“Ohhh!”

In the instant of explosive pressure, he made the decision necessary to ensure he would not lose, to ensure he would not experience defeat.

●

Kazami tried to drive her attack into Alex’s throat.

She did not intend to kill him. Mechanical dragons were sturdy and he would not actually die unless she destroyed the reactor in his torso.

But G-Sp2’s accelerated piercing would be able to break through his frame and render him unable to fight.

So she aimed her attack toward Alex’s throat frame as the smoke and impacts from the explosives bent him and left him helpless on his back.

“G-Sp2!”

She made her attack.

But in that instant, something flew from Alex’s stomach and all the explosive flames enveloping him.

…A missile!? Is he prepared to self-destruct!?

But she was wrong.

She would have been able to dodge a missile.

What she actually saw was so unexpected that she briefly hesitated once it came into view.

It was Wanambi’s transportation pallet that had been connected to his stomach.

“!?”

Having the Concept Core taken would mean his loss, but he had thrown it.

…Wha-

Before she could finish her thought, it struck her right shoulder.

The impact and its weight shifted her off course and her surprise shook her body.

“——”

The impact reached G-Sp2 just as she was going to throw it.

But she threw it regardless. She used all her strength, knowing this was her last chance to attack.

“Please!!”

But a moment later, she realized what Alex was trying to do.

“I will not lose even if you beg me!”

He shouted back and used the pressurizers on his back to charge toward her.

Countless of his own attacks struck him and his armor was destroyed as he slammed his own body into them.

…It can’t be!

A metallic sound filled the air and she heard an impact.

●

G-Sp2 was on course to strike Alex and pierce through him, but he did not hesitate.

He continued straight toward G-Sp2.

“Are you trying to kill yourself!?”

He did not answer Kazami.

The flying spear stabbed into his right chest frame where his armor panels were thick.

“Ohhhh!!”

With a draconic roar, light exploded from the newly-formed hole.

It burst out.

But he endured. He twisted his body and used his entire frame to grab at G-Sp2 many times over, even as the tip thrust out from his back and explosive blasts burst from every gap on his body.

“…!”

With a fierce noise, metal broke, steel bent, components scattered, and pieces fried.

For a human, this would be the same as running a grinder from the right side of their chest to their lower back.

But Alex endured it and stopped it.

The sound, light, and impact all stopped with only shimmering heat remaining in the chilly sky.

This left behind two results:

Alex had closed his front right leg to seize G-Sp2 inside himself.

Kazami had expanded her wings and caught Wanambi’s transportation pallet in midair.

●

The automatons pursuing the two combatants in the surveillance plane realized the battlefield had come to a stop.

Floating in the sky were Kazami and Alex, who was spewing sparks, beams of light, and smoke as his entire body groaned.

Alex was very nearly destroyed.

The missile hits had been bad enough, but a hole had been pierced from the right side of his chest and out his back. The impact had blown off almost all of his armor from within.

He had lost most of his equipment save what was attached to his base form.

“Every time he moves, he creaks and bends…”

However, the result of the battle and his state were two different things.

The eyes looking up from the plane saw Alex rise further into the sky while producing dull metallic noises.

He spoke during his slow ascent.

“What happens when we both steal the other’s Concept Core?”

“The battle is complete,” answered one of the automatons. “In accordance with the rules…”

She chose the most accurate expression.

“I have determined both sides have won.”

“Is that so?” muttered Alex.

The automatons then heard Kazami’s voice.

She slowly flapped her wings and relaxed her body.

“I can’t believe this. Aren’t heroes supposed to grant people’s requests?”

“I am sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she replied with a shrug and a bitter smile. “As the villain, I suppose I should say this: Don’t think this means you’ve won.”

Chapter 41

“Title of the Heart”

Where nameless regret takes you
What you want to a maddening degree
And the crest of a heart that desires once more

●

A clock rang six times in a large space.

The people in that underground room of Japanese UCAT's Kanda Laboratory were watching two worlds reach a conclusion.

They all glanced upwards as the six tones continued to sound.

A single red light could be seen on the map of Tokyo displayed on the ceiling.

"So the two remaining battles will be Mikoto-kun and Hiba-kun against Hajji-kun and Mikoku-kun."

Ooshiro nodded, took a sip of the tea sitting on the desk, and gave another gentle comment.

"This is bitter. Where is it from?"

"Testament. I had tea leaves hand-prepared especially for you shipped in from India."

"Hand-prepared?"

"The region emphasizes sincerity, so they squeeze the tea leaves in their fists to draw out their power. …We have named it Stubborn Old Man's Fist Tea."

Ooshiro immediately tried to run from the room, but #8 grabbed his collar.

"Ooshiro-sama, why are you leaving your post?"

"I-I couldn't possibly say that."

He wiggled around but his expression suddenly grew serious and he collapsed limply to his knees.

Sweat poured down his face as he hung his head to look toward the floor.

"#8-kun, I think that sudden movement sped up the process."

"You are imagining it. And they say one's imagination can bring illness. …Not that we can understand such unscientific ideas. At any rate, please explain the current situation."

"Oh, well, um, uh…"

He crawled below the desk and rocked back and forth as if bearing with something.

"Low-Gear has two ties and one loss. *To win,* we must win the remaining two battles."

"Testament. I am surprised you calculated that out correctly."

"…How stupid do you think I am?"

She did not reply. Instead, she raised her right palm toward the surrounding automatons and gently waved it back and forth. She then turned back to Ooshiro.

"We have nothing to say about that."

"Y-you just made sure you didn't, didn't you!?"

"Calm down, Ooshiro-sama. To be blunt, Low-Gear is in trouble, isn't it?"

Her expression grew slightly more serious.

"Hiba-sama is a problem."

"Why do you say that?"

"Testament. He does not have Mikage-sama with him at the moment, so he will have to fight on his own. His odds of victory are extremely uncertain and his odds of defeat are high," she said. "So I hope his opponent is Mikoku-sama."

"Why not Hajji-kun? He lost pretty badly during their attack on UCAT."

"He pushed back Abram-sama on the surface, defeated Kashima-sama and the other defense units, fought Abram-sama a second time, and then finally faced Sayama-sama. And both Arnavaz-sama and Shinjou-sama provided assistance. …One could say that he was only stopped after all those people were thrown at him."

After pausing for a breath, she continued.

"In a one-on-one battle, Hajji-sama may be Top-Gear's most powerful representative."

●

White clothing fluttered in the city at night.

It was in front of a large building's tiled entrance which created a small plaza of empty space.

The white clothes were atop the guardrail protecting the trees lining the road.

An elderly Arab man sat on the guardrail with a cellphone to his ear.

He was looking to the building in front of him.

"Meiji University's Surugadai Campus."

It was located in Kanda, down a southern slope from Ochanomizu Station which bordered Akihabara on the east.

It was to the west on the way down to the Imperial Palace.

The school building was covered in nearly olive-colored tiles and it stood twenty-three stories tall.

The university's winter break had begun at this time of year, so not many people left even at six in the evening.

But he spoke regardless. He spoke into the cellphone held to his left ear.

"Abram…no, Sarv. Can you hear me? Hm?"

After a short delay, his carefree question received a response.

"Testament. I can hear you…Hajji."

"Oh, is that so?" Hajji nodded. "Then I'll call you Abram. …That sense of distance is a relief."

"Do you really have nothing better to do?"

"We're only ever busy when engaged in battle. Isn't that right?" He looked to the sidewalk as he spoke. "I visited the Imperial Palace's garden today. I realized I never had before. …I'm not going to say it looked artificial or that the security seemed far too lax. Once we change the world, it won't need security at all. Yes."

He gently kicked the asphalt sidewalk.

"Did you know this sidewalk was paved with bricks and Westernized about forty years ago?"

"Yes. But people began throwing the bricks during student riots involving thousands of people, so it was paved over."

"Were they sealed away because they were thrown? Or was it because of history? Or…might it have been their will?"

"I'm not a politician, so I don't know. But Hajji…"

"What?" he asked.

"First the attack on UCAT and then the meeting yesterday. You really do like playing the villain."

"You sound just like Mikoku. And I'm not playing anything. This is who I truly am."

"After the meeting, Sayama told me to keep an eye on you to make sure you didn't kill yourself as the villain in an attempt to take all the responsibility with you."

Hajji froze for a moment at that, but he soon responded.

"Everyone is far too kind. Have you forgotten what I did to 1st and 3rd as the Army?"

"Neither of those Gears would have been able to survive without you."

"That was only due to our agreements. …Please stop treating me like a good person. I thought I understood Top-Gear, but I understood nothing and I used my blind hatred to borrow Top-Gear's authority and oppose you all. Once all of this is over…I suppose I'll be burnt at the stake or something."

"Then let me ask you a question Sayama left with me."

Hajji stiffened at those sudden words, but he still let out a long white sigh.

"What is it?"

"Do you think Shinjou Yukio had realized the truth of Top-Gear and the true creation of the world?"

"…"

Hajji fell silent.

"If she had, then your actions were truly those of a villain committed to evil. Sayama said that would be truly regrettable. And…he also said you do not need to answer that question."

"Why not?"

"Well," said Abram. "According to him, Sayama Kaoru once said that people become villains when they experience circumstances that leave them not wanting to touch anyone but those closest to them. And Sayama Kaoru had lost the person closest to him."

"I see," said Hajji as he closed his eyes and let out another white breath. "You are soft, Abram."

"Not as much as you. Nor am I as hard on myself as you are."

"You are imagining things. More importantly, have you and the wife you chose had a child?"

That question remained unanswered, but a response came in another form.

"My wife wants to build schools."

"Schools?"

"Yes. In the sandy desert she comes from and in many other places. …She wants them to be places of shade where people are taught how to live and, in some cases, how to change or fight against nature."

"I see," muttered Hajji. "If it was your idea, I would have called you a hypocrite. Yes."

He kicked the asphalt sidewalk again.

"Hey, does that land resemble ours?"

"Yes," replied the other man. "It was just as I'd heard: no water, a drastic difference between day and night, dark shadows, sand everywhere, and the people are swept away by the wind and sand. But…"

Hajji heard him breathe in.

"There were people there who tried to change that land, lamented or tried to stop the conflict, wished to go elsewhere, or…waited for someone to arrive from elsewhere. So…"

So…

“I no longer knew what was important and I began to wish it could all be important.”

“So you did know.” Hajji placed his feet on the sidewalk. “You did. You are a hero, Abram Mesam. …You are the hero who chose this world, so you can continue on ahead. I on the other hand…”

Hajji smiled bitterly, trailed off, and said something else instead.

“Let me answer that question and you tell Shinjou and Sayama. …Tell them that Shinjou Yukio was a woman who only ever said the truth.”

With those words, he ended the call.

He stood on the sidewalk and reached out his left hand. He grabbed a long bundle of white cloth that was leaning on the guardrail and turned around.

“I on the other hand will remain in the past.”

As he turned around, he saw a short figure on the sidewalk across the two-lane road.

The boy, Hiba, wore a backpack and had walked here from Akihabara.

Hajji looked to Hiba and Hiba looked to Hajji.

Their eyes met and Hajji opened his mouth, but Hiba cut him off with a shout.

“Th-there is nothing inappropriate in this backpack! Just because I came from Akihabara d-doesn’t mean it’s filled with inappropriate DVDs and games!! A pure minor such as myself…”

He tilted his head and almost seemed to be asking Hajji for his opinion.

“…w-wouldn’t buy anything like that?”

Hajji immediately attacked with the long object in his right hand.

●

The surveillance plane flying over Kanda reported on the beginning of the battle.

“H-Hiba-sama has…”

The report was broadcast out to the world.

“…done something stupid!!”

●

Hiba ran through the nighttime city.

He ran full speed down a slope.

He chose to travel down the very center of the two-lane road because the surrounding cars were moving.

There was no one driving them because he was inside a concept space, but their residual speed kept them moving and crashing before slowing down in clumps.

As they moved so unpredictably, Hiba raced down the road while ignoring the traffic lights and letting the lights of the roadside stores wash over him.

He had pictured Kanda and Ochanomizu as a region of musical instruments and books, but he decided to forever abandon that enjoyable image.

Attacks flew in from behind him.

The attacks demonstrated the powers of fire and darkness.

A pillar of fire shot his way from behind and it burned away anything it even grazed.

And the reverberating darkness stopped all things and shattered them like ice.

The sounds of spreading flames and shattering reached him from behind, along with footsteps far wider and calmer than his own racing ones.

…I can’t believe this.

“Miki isn’t my opponent?”

Even as he said that, he asked himself what that meant.

Was he disappointed or happy he was not fighting her?

To lighten his load, he threw out the contents of his backpack.

…Ahh, and there were some rare DVDs and games in there.

He cried as he ran and tossed the items backwards.

“A worthless diversion!” shouted a voice behind him.

Multiple flames raced through the air and incinerated Hiba’s rare finds.

Hiba thought to himself as he watched the wind scatter the white DVD ashes into the night sky.

…Perverted things are being dissolved into this concept space.

The next attack was directed at him, so he took a leap.

“Wah!” he shouted while jumping like a frog, stepping atop a nearby car, and jumping again.

A pillar of fire immediately swept by below his feet.

“!”

The Ochanomizu street was instantly annihilated.

Within a radius of about three hundred meters, everything along the path of the swing was turned to ashes: the trees, the buildings, and even the air itself.

The ephemeral white remnants scattered like confetti.

Hiba ran below all of those paper blossoms filling the dark city.

…What do I do?

He jumped from car to car as he thought.

…How do I fight?

He built up the flow of the battle.

His opponent was Hajji. The man’s combat experience far exceeded his own, the man was physically larger than him, and the man had a weapon.

Most of the factors that influenced a fight came down to one’s build.

A height difference of thirty centimeters created a full fist’s worth of difference in reach.

Hajji was about forty centimeters taller than Hiba and he was probably more than thirty kilograms heavier.

On top of that, Hajji had a weapon. The spear was likely B-Sp which Abram had used against American UCAT’s mechanical dragons during the battle with Black Sun.

Hajji had the upper hand in experience, size, and weaponry.

…So what do I do!?

Just as he wondered that, his vision opened up.

The large intersection leading to Jinbocho came into view down the hill.

This created a valley in the dully glowing buildings straight ahead and to either side. The valleys seemed to be waiting for him there.

“———”

The cars that had collided in the intersection were stopped there, clogging up the road.

Once he reached the intersection, he would run into that group of stopped cars.

One of them was sitting below the traffic light, facing him.

As soon as he began to jump over it, he sensed a presence behind him.

…Is it coming!?

Something like intent to kill or a premonition stroked his back and flames powerful enough to pierce straight through the car were fired toward his jumping back.

●

Hajji broke through the darkness that could not be fully banished by the artificial lights.

A pillar of fire shot ahead of him and instantly set a car on fire further down the slope.

The ground beyond the car did not escape that piercing incineration either.

Flames rose from the center of the intersection as the asphalt burned.

A pillar of fire rose and the explosion of air sent the car flying.

As it rose five meters in the air, even the metal parts of the car burned to ashes like kindling and the lingering flames illuminated the surrounding area.

That illumination revealed the burning intersection.

There was the sound of burning, a heated wind, a scorching pressure, and a flickering light.

They all reminded him of old times.

However, something of those old times was missing.

There was something he had always felt with each attack.

“Why didn’t I feel it hit anything!?”

As soon as he shouted, Hajji realized he could not hear his own voice.

…No, not just my voice. My entire surroundings.

The scenery, the sounds, the temperature of the air, and every sensation besides that on the soles of his feet had vanished.

This was one of the powers of 7th-Gear’s Concept Core.

●

Hiba kicked off the hood of a car and flew up above Hajji.

He used the sinking and recoil of the car's suspension to propel himself ten meters high.

The strength for this great leap had come from Nijun's red sphere which he had pulled from the bottom of his backpack.

He had also pulled out Mitsuaki's black sphere to seal his opponent's senses.

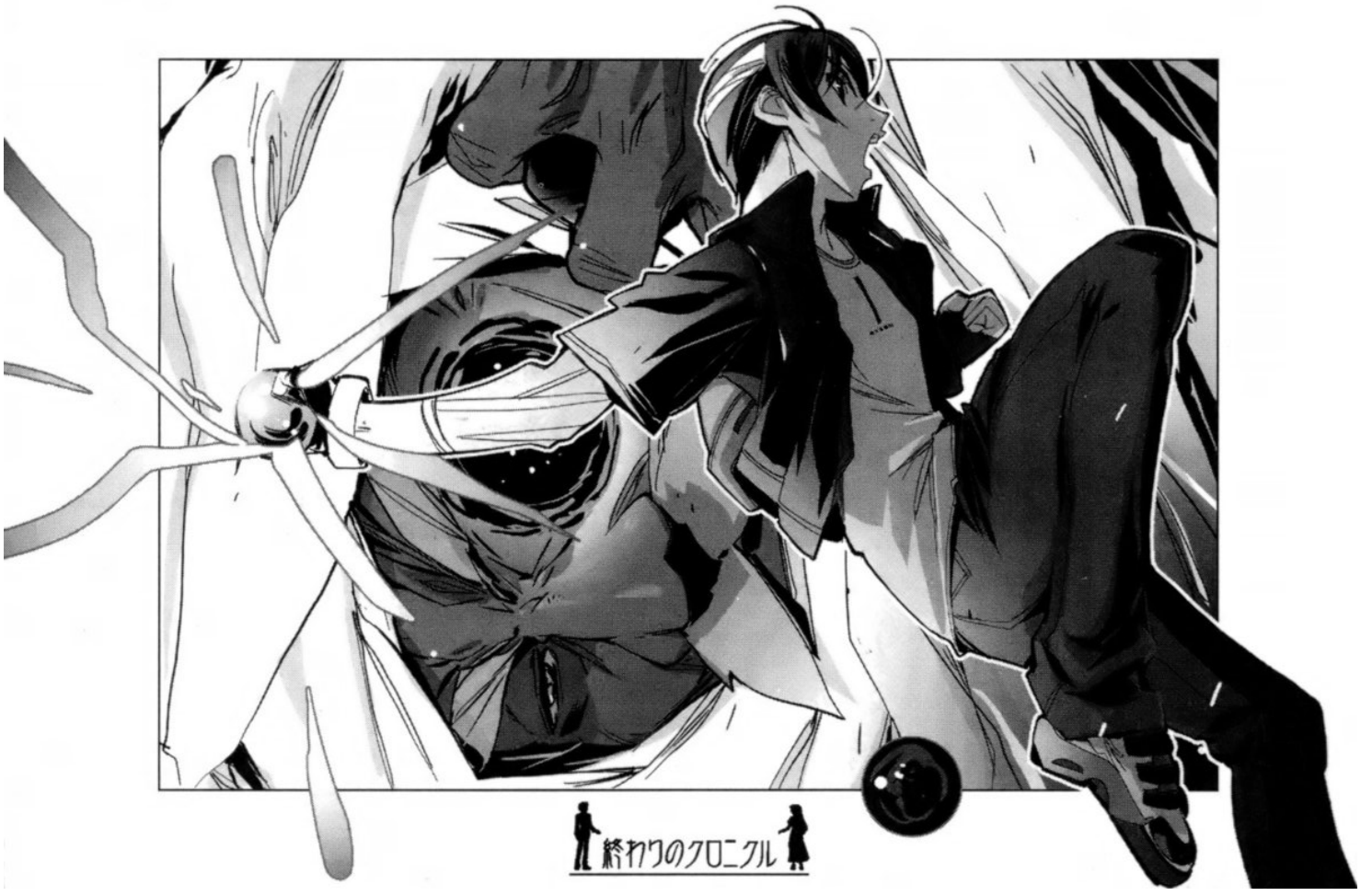
Ten meters below, Hajji had stopped moving.

He had only kicked off the hood of the car and jumped after drawing Hajji's flames in to hide him from view. And as he began to drop, he was certain that Hajji had still lost track of him and had also lost his senses.

...Even Kazami-san and the others had trouble with this concept.

He knew what the most effective attack was when your opponent had ample experience.

...You put them in a situation they've never experienced before.


終わりのクロニクル

He had run and drawn in Hajji's attacks before doing this.

Hajji would not have realized he had 7th-Gear's concepts, so this attack was key. He knew this would not work against this man more than once.

He chose to move straight in and dropped toward his right knee.

But in that instant, he heard a quiet sound like a creaking glass door.

The sound gradually grew like a swinging pendulum.

"!!"

And it broke.

Space…no, the power of the concept shattered.

Hiba saw Hajji remove his eyepatch and…

"You stopped and shattered the portion of the concept space around you!?"

"Did you think I couldn't?"

Hajji directed his voice up at Hiba and spun B-Sp around in his right arm.

"Now, answer me! Are you a hero!?"

A pillar of fire shot straight up toward Hiba.

"———!!"

In a split-second decision, he chose one of the four colors: blue, red, black, or white.

He chose white.

He pulled Yonkichi's sphere from the backpack. That white sphere instantaneously swapped his and his opponent's positions.

Hiba looked up at the rising pillar of fire and saw Hajji in its path.

It was on a collision course, so Hajji would be burned away by his own flames.

However, a denial of that fate appeared before Hiba's eyes.

B-Sp's all-consuming fire was stopped.

It was stopped by Hajji's eye.

The fire stopped moving and became a glowing shape.

"Toh."

Hajji calmly kicked the pillar of fire, breaking it.

With the sound of shattering glass, the fire crumbled away.

It looked like red and yellow flower petals scattering in the wind.

Surrounded by what sounded like small bells, Hiba realized Hajji was dropping back down with his spear aimed at him.

…This is ridiculous!

A month and a half earlier, 7th-Gear's Concept Core had given them so much trouble, but it did not slow this man down in the slightest.

Not only that, but he could freely destroy and manipulate his own attacks.

Hiba leaped down the hill toward the intersection to escape Hajji's attack, but then he saw something from above the ash-filled intersection.

Hajji had kicked off empty air and was catching up to him.

…!?

It was only after that when Hiba heard the metallic sound.

Hajji had used his eye's stopping power to solidify empty air so he could kick off it.

The air shattered and Mitsuaki's power shattered around him as it continued to expand.

There was no escape. Hajji descended from midair as if descending a flight of stairs.

…He's right in front of me!

He back-stepped as if looking up the slope just as the tall form in white dropped down in front of him.

The white cloth seemed to flap around him and he landed on the white ash-filled land in a crouch.

"You do not show your back when you run. You must have been trained well as a soldier."

Hiba only realized a slash was coming once the man had finished speaking.

Hajji raised his right arm and swung down B-Sp2 without any flames.

"Ah…"

Hiba felt cold air running from his right side to directly above him and from the right side of his chest to the right side of his collarbone.

He also felt chilly air stroke his right cheek.

It felt cold because there was heat there.

The thought of "oh, no" came later.

"!!"

As his heart beat, the clothing covering the right side of his body was torn and color burst into the air.

It only burst out at first, but it did not stop.

He took a step back as if pushed by the pressure of his blood, but then Hajji spoke.

"You did well to dodge that."

I didn't dodge it, thought Hiba. *You intentionally missed.*

And that was why Hiba breathed in, wiped the blood from his right cheek, and looked to Hajji.

That's right, he thought. *I can't hope to match him.*

But, he also thought.

...I can't let myself die here.

"Because a future of flirting with Mikage-san awaits me!"

"Did you perhaps think what you meant to say and vice versa?" asked Hajji. "And can you not take this fight seriously since I am not Tatsumi?"

Hiba gasped at the sudden mention of Tatsumi's name.

He looked to Hajji's face and found the man was not smiling as usual. He was staring intently and quietly back at the boy.

"Even if this battle comes to an end and the world is changed, you will still have to face Tatsumi. ...And at the very least, you cannot stand before her if you are cut down by me."

Hiba reflexively asked a question.

He maintained his defensive stance but frowned and tried to ask what Hajji was getting at.

"Why do Miki and I have to fight each other!?"

"Well," began Hajji. "That is probably because Tatsumi chose you as her opponent."

"B-but that's so selfish! Then again, Miki was pretty selfish!"

"Then aren't you also selfish for not answering her? No matter how weak you are or how much you run away, she has continued to choose you as her opponent. ...But have you even once answered her?"

Hajji's words slammed into Hiba who remained still.

"She is asking a question that can only be answered by fighting you, so until she does so, she has never once allowed herself to lose and she waits all alone. ...She is waiting for your true self once you have sought true resolve."

"But why-...?"

He swallowed the rest of his question.

The answer to that question was something only she would know.

...I can't believe this.

He had heard a number of reasons, but he still could not accept it.

However, he had a general understanding that she was indeed waiting for him.

"If I don't go face her, will..."

He asked his question.

"Will Miki continue to win?"

Hajji gave him a single answer.

"Can you win?"

That question gave Hiba a single thought.

"...Can I not run away?"

"You can," said Hajji. "But Tatsumi will wait for you even then."

And...

"Just as you wait for another girl to awaken."

●

Hiba hung his head at what Hajji said.

...I can't believe this.

He suddenly thought of Mikage.

He pictured her waiting for him at home, in an alley, and in the UCAT lobby.

He quite liked that she waited for him and she said she liked it too.

But that was due to a certain promise.

...That I'll definitely be there.

So...

"What does Miki think?" he slowly asked. "Does she think I'm coming?"

He knew the answer without being told.

…Yes.

What a troublesome person, he thought. *She really is my opposite.*

…Is she the version of me that likes waiting?

“—————”

Hiba sighed and his lungs cooled.

…I don’t know.

He had yet to decide whether he should fight or what he should do, but…

“Miki will continue to wait for me even if I don’t know, won’t she?”

Hajji slowly nodded and lightly threw out his chest.

“Then do you know what you will do here?”

“Yes,” nodded Hiba.

What I’m going to do and say here is outrageous, he thought. *But if I don’t go through with it, she’ll probably be waiting forever.*

“Please.”

He raised his fists, faced Hajji, and breathed in. As the air entered his lungs, strength filled his gut and he gathered his resolve.

He spoke to the man who had travelled much farther than him down the path of combat.

“Please be my opponent so that I might continue on to where Miki is.”

“You might lose here, you know?”

“She will still wait for me even if I do. But I don’t know what I should do for her. All I know is that I’ll lose again if nothing changes.”

“So you want to grow at least a little stronger by defeating me?”

“Yes,” said Hiba while realizing how outrageous this really was. “Miki is undefeated, but you have lost once. So at the very least, I can’t stand before her without defeating you first!”

Without hesitation, he crouched down, stomped a foot down, and used the recoil.

“…!!”

He charged forward as he wondered if he could reach the person…no, the two people who were waiting for him.

●

A combination attack required speed and endurance and it could only be pulled off after learning how to segue one movement into another.

It all came down to linking one attack with the next.

For example, if one sent their right fist forward, the right side of their body would also move forward.

The left side of their body would be pulling back, so it became difficult to send their left fist forward.

But what if, when stepping forward on their right foot, they twisted their heel inward?

Their body would slide rightward and it would more easily rotate clockwise.

If they kicked forward with their left foot in that instant, they would be able to move their entire left side forward along with their fist.

By repeating similar actions, they could pull off more than just a series of punches; they could put their hips behind the blows and each attack in the series would be strong enough to actually defeat an opponent.

Hiba was able to do this.

He had the speed, endurance, movements, and experience.

But in his case, that experience was not from flesh-and-blood combat.

Most of his battles against 3rd-Gear had been fought between gods of war and none of his training in the dojo or at UCAT had forced him to put his life on the line.

But he still had definite experience: experience of defeat.

…How lame.

That was how he viewed himself. He felt he had yet to mature into a proper fighter.

But, he thought. *But what’s wrong with that?*

He just could not let himself be content with that position.

…I want to grow stronger.

He let loose his combination attack and Hajji received it.

In Hiba’s case, having his fist blocked did not mean his attack had been stopped.

He redirected the recoil of the blocked fist into his next attack.

His fists flew while he seemed to quickly spin. His knees, his legs, and especially his elbows were perfect for this high-speed rotation.

And Hajji put some distance between them.

He put a car between them and then sent his stopping concept toward the car.

But Hiba swung his body toward the slope and side-flipped out of the way.

Once he landed, he leaped towards Hajji and threw a backhand blow.

He heard a solid sound as Hajji blocked with B-Sp's shaft.

The tip was pointed down and it flew up to scoop Hiba upwards.

Hiba kicked the tip and jumped straight up on his own.

At the same time, B-Sp collided with the car behind him.

However…

"…!"

Hajji continued swinging B-Sp.

As if he were playing golf, he hit the fallen red car toward Hiba.

A tremendous noise rang out and the "golf ball" flew.

Hiba kicked the side of the flying car and prepared to jump from it, but the car fell to pieces.

Hajji had planned this. By destroying the car just as Hiba was going to jump, he had canceled the boy's jump.

Hiba would inevitably fall without having time to prepare for a landing.

"—————"

Except he did not.

He was not acting based on reflex.

He had predicted what Hajji would do and had prepared for his landing while damp with cold sweat and warm blood.

Once he landed, he would charge toward Hajji who had just finished swinging B-Sp. The man's eyes were turned upwards toward the car, so he would be wide open.

Except that did not work out either.

Hiba suddenly realized he had stopped falling.

"Eh?"

It lasted just a brief moment and then he heard something like shattering glass coming from the empty air below his feet.

…He used his stopping power to create a path for my fall!?

That meant the man had predicted what Hiba would do two steps in advance.

And as Hiba's slightly delayed fall resumed, he saw Hajji charging his way. The man rotated B-Sp once and swung it horizontally as if to scoop up the boy.

"…!!"

The spear tip hit.

●

The automatons in the surveillance plane heard a solid impact coming from one section of Kanda.

An electronic tone came from the surveillance system.

"Hiba-sama was hit!!"

That announcement filled the plane with tension.

Hiba had not been holding back.

When none of a fighter's attacks could reach their enemy and they were hit first, one thing was more frightening than the injury: the loss of momentum.

Their focus would drop and they would be unable to move as quickly again.

And as if to prove that, an automaton spoke up quietly.

"Hiba-sama is not moving. He is alive but motionless."

●

I can't believe this, thought Hiba.

He could see the sky. The night sky was slanted.

He thought about where he was.

…Where is this? It looks like the school building of some university.

He was probably on the seventh floor and he was lying face-up near the window of an unlit classroom.

His moonlit bed was made from a windowsill, glass, and a broken wall.

He tasted blood in his mouth.

His back had broken through the window and was intermittently convulsing from the impact.

Pain filled his entire body and he could barely breathe.

This was the result of just one mistake.

…I can't believe this.

Suddenly, something blocked the moonlight.

The pale light backlit Hajji and his white cloak. The man's shoulders rose and fell as he caught his breath and his spear was lowered in his right hand.

"What's the matter? Hm?" he asked. "Didn't you want to be a hero?"

Hiba just about apologized because he felt he had been rude to this master fighter.

But the voice that left his lungs said something else.

"You…"

His voice was trembling and scratchy.

"You're so strong…but can you not become a hero yourself?"

His question brought silence.

For a few seconds, he simply tried to catch his breath and saw Hajji hang his head.

But then the man spoke from the moon's backlighting.

"That is none of your concern. …Besides, some people do not wish to be a hero."

Hiba thought about calling that a lie. This man had so much strength and the power to lead.

…So why does he try to make people hate him?

Hiba did not know.

All he knew was that Hajji had not once done anything remotely unfair during their battle. He had done a few things like that during the attack on UCAT, yet he had done no such thing during this battle that he absolutely had to win.

That meant he was not willing to win at all costs.

"Kh…"

Hiba tried to get up. His entire body ached and he was frozen with pain.

His body was telling him not to move.

And Hajji's words seemed to respond.

"How about we end this? How about we declare this my victory and thus Top-Gear's overall victory?"

After a pause, he spoke more quietly.

"You go pursue Tatsumi."

Dammit, thought Hiba. *I can't let it end like this.*

…This man…

This man still hasn't gone all out. He still hasn't put up a fight worthy of the title hero.

A hero, thought Hiba.

If I was a hero, I'd be able to reach Miki.

He now realized the opponent before him was a shortcut to that goal and he wanted to face him as a hero.

But his body ached and refused to move.

"—————"

And then he heard a sudden noise. It came from the cellphone he had dropped on the floor.

After ringing twice, it automatically answered and he heard new sounds: hurried footsteps and a female voice.

"This is Tsukuyomi of Japanese UCAT's Development Department. …Am I interrupting? Or did I make it in time?"

For what? he wondered as he slowly breathed in and listened to the fallen cellphone.

"Listen. I'm about to let you hear something very important."

Another sound immediately followed.

It was a heavy, deep, muffled sound, but it was also very short and it played again shortly thereafter.

…Is this…?

It was a pulse.

"Now that we've made it this far, I'm sure she'll wake up. So…so make sure you come back."

He heard a hint of a smile in Tsukuyomi's voice and also heard a chair move.

"Knowing you, you're probably on the verge of death. But you know what, Hiba boy? The people who return from the verge of death, are the ones who still have something to do in this world. If you die, then why is she even trying to wake up? She has something she still wants to do here and she's waiting for you."

So…

“Climb up the hill leading from the underworld. Climb up that hill and you’ll find the land of the living.”

“———”

Hiba breathed in just as the call ended.

But he had managed to breathe in.

He forced in the air he needed to move.

“Ah!”

And as if tearing his own body, he moved.

●

Two figures jumped out into the dark city.

They attacked in midair, put distance between themselves, and landed on the slope.

They were Hajji and Hiba.

Hajji was to the west and Hiba to the east.

Hajji stood calmly while Hiba’s trembling body doubled over and blood spilled to the ground.

However, Hiba did not hesitate to charge forward.

By taking in a quick breath, he kept his body as tense as he could manage. He used the breath to keep the bleeding to a minimum and began the battle with a fist.

Hajji blocked and then attacked.

Hiba avoided the rising blade with quick footwork.

He moved in by reversing that footwork.

As the two of them continually attacked, dodged, and defended, they raced up the slope.

The top of the slope came into view, along with Ochanomizu Station and the bridge crossing the river next to the station.

The two of them arrived within one hundred meters of there.

Hiba was able to focus, so he gave a yell.

“Why!?”

He asked a question of a man who had fought more than he knew.

“Why did you give up on being a hero!?”

“Because I couldn’t protect them!”

“Neither could I!”

“But you have someone waiting for you to return. …Two, in fact.”

Hiba’s bloodshot eyes saw Hajji smile in a way he had never seen before.

During the meeting, he had seen the man smile normally several times, but never this closed-mouth smile that simply narrowed his eyes a little.

“But…”

Hiba moved quickly so his combination attack would reach.

It was as if getting a blow in would convey his thoughts.

Solid sounds rang out, his evasion and attacks flowed together, and even his own blows shook his entire body.

“But that’s too sad!”

“Emotions that can be described in words lack reality, Hiba. You know what? I no longer have anyone to protect.”

Hiba thought about the man’s words and smile.

Oh, he might be a different form of me.

I can stay as I am because the people I care about are still alive, but after losing the people he needed to protect, did he no longer know what to do?

Did he give into desperation and decide to become a villain?

Then did my step-sister who now goes by Tatsumi do the same?

He had recovered when he heard Mikage’s pulse, so it was possible he could not understand them.

But, he thought about what Hajji had said.

“Then…”

Then…

“Why did you make your sister’s power a part of yourself!?”

“—————”

Yes, that’s right.

I’m certain of it. I understand. Or at least I feel like I do. On this point, he’s definitely just like me.

“Once, I put a barely-conscious girl in a wheelchair, took her outside, and showed her this world.”

He sent out another blow that would not reach the man, but still wanted this to hit home.

“You too showed that eye this world! And you must have promised to show her a new world! And…and when you did…”

His voice rose to shout.

“You decided to become a hero, even if no one would know it!!”

His blow hit, but Hajji blocked it with B-Sp.

However, the man’s defense was slightly different from before.

This time, he pushed Hiba away as he blocked.

The next thing Hiba knew, they had reached the top of the slope.

They both let out white breaths and faced each other from a distance of ten meters.

They looked straight at each other with the light of the surveillance plane overhead.

Even as he trembled, Hiba gave a powerful nod with a serious expression.

“I will win. …So that I can continue on to those who are waiting for me.”

So…

“Please lose. …So that you can face those who waited for you.”

Hajji smiled bitterly, but…

“So you have two people waiting for you? …Kids these days are spoiled.”

The bitterness left his smile just before they both leaned forward and moved.

●

Hajji fought.

He blocked his enemy’s attacks, sent forth his own power, moved his body, and continually searched for an opening to victory.

Sounds reverberated around him. They were the sounds of battle and they were familiar to his mind and body.

It had only been a month and a half since he had fought Abram, so he felt fortunate to hear these sounds again so soon.

His weapons were the eye in which his sister resided, 9th-Gear’s Concept Core, and his own body.

He had no real grudge against his enemy.

That enemy saw himself in Hajji, but it was a one-sided view.

As an emotion, it was sentiment. As a color, it was green. As a texture, it was soft.

However, Hajji felt something nostalgic in that.

He and the others had once been like that.

While attacking again and again and pursuing his enemy’s movements, Hajji recalled days long past when he had fought and trained like this in the sand and below the bright sky.

His enemy here was young. The boy could easily have been his grandson.

As they fought, that boy was catching up. He had caught up in speed, he made up for his weak attacks with combinations, and he would circle around behind Hajji before sending in his fists.

To land a blow, he would make feints, throw decoy attacks, use tricky movements, and do whatever else it took.

But none if it felt underhanded. After all, Hajji was overwhelmingly more powerful.

Hajji’s blows were stronger, the speed of his straight-line movements was greater, and he had the advantage in reach, endurance, build, experience, and so much more.

So the boy used everything available to him as he faced the man.

He moved around Hajji and slipped his own attacks in. A few of them grazed Hajji, but he never managed a solid blow.

All that reached Hajji were the sounds, movements, and breaths of battle.

Wonderful, thought Hajji.

Do whatever you can, he thought. *I will receive it all head-on.*

I am fighting with my full strength, but you are desperate. I will do nothing to damage that desperation.

Why? Because a desperate opponent feels that defeat is the same as death.

It is like a glass knife.

Strike it on the side and it readily breaks, but to do that is to forcibly break it.

If the glass knife breaks when received head-on, then it broke due to its own weakness.

In the former case, the knife will never be made again. No one will know whether it was a poor-quality knife or not, but the fact that it broke still remains.

But in the latter case, someone will surely decide to make an even stronger knife.

This boy is the latter.

I really do think I'm a teacher, don't I? thought Hajji before thinking about his sister.

If she had lived and married the hero, would he have taught her how to use a sword?

That could never be now.

He had not taught Mikoku or Shino how to use a sword. So that they could live in the new world, he had felt they should not wield any more power than they themselves desired.

But lately, Mikoku had chosen to enter that territory and seemed to have gained some kind of confidence.

If, he thought.

...If I had trained those two, would they have become like this boy?

This enemy was filling all of his inadequacies with desperation in order to defeat Hajji.

This enemy was forming attacks from his desire to defeat Hajji.

These attacks did not come from hostility.

They were the product of a pure desire to overcome him.

Wonderful, he felt.

A wonderful enemy.

This boy has something he must protect. He has someone who protects him, who he protects, and who creates a place for him to return to.

He is a hero, thought Hajji.

And he had self-importantly asked Hajji to lose.

...So I can face those who waited for me, hm?

Don't worry, he thought. *You are a hero.*

And I can no longer become a hero.

That's right, he muttered in his heart. *I am no hero.*

"I am simply a man with strength."

But his comment received a response.

"No!!"

The shout ran to the side.

"That can't be true. After all..."

Hajji caught sight of the opponent who quickly back-stepped away.

The boy twisted his eyebrows and looked on the verge of tears as he created the space he needed to charge in.

"Why do you always think about how you can't be with anyone!? Why don't you ever think about being somewhere for others to return to!?"

They were ten meters apart once more. Without taking a breath, the boy shrank down like a spring.

"The people you lost are looking at this same world with you and the world you lost gave you this world you stand in now!"

"Do you really think they and their world would rejoice in a world that paves over and hides everything?"

Hajji forcefully prepared for his next move.

He decided to end this here and to win no matter what it took.

"This is a world of lies!"

"But as a false version of yourself, you spoke of them on the night of that attack!"

A voice rang through the air and Hajji calmly saw the boy take the first step of his charge.

"Are you saying even that was a lie!?"

Hajji saw an explosion of speed.

The boy had chosen to dash forward.

In what was likely his final move, he ran in a straight line in order to simply win and overcome Hajji.

The boy's blood sprayed into the air and his body overcame his speed.

He rushed in and Hajji launched an attack on the coming conclusion.

●

Hiba no longer hesitated.

He used his power as he ran.

The first thing he used was Mitsuaki's concept of non-understanding.

The concept's power was unleashed with a metallic noise, but Hajji immediately shattered it with his stopping power.

Hiba had known it would not work.

But Hajji's use of that power had made him waste some time, no matter how slight.

Hiba had done it because it could lead to even a tiny chance for victory.

He swung his body, propelled himself forward with the bottoms of his feet, felt a sticky sensation as the soles of his shoes left the asphalt, and continued forward.

Hajji raised B-Sp.

There was still some distance between them, so Hajji would be able to thrust B-Sp forward and send out the flames before Hiba arrived.

That was why Hiba used his next power: Nijun's concept of truth.

There could be no lies, so all feints and diversions were sealed.

...My movements will accurately guide me!

His body felt a bit restricted because the feints burned into him by experience were being restrained as unnecessary.

But that restrained power brought his feet more strongly to the ground and Nijun's bodily reinforcement power raised his speed further.

However, Hajji was faster.

At seven meters apart, Hajji's arm was just about to complete its swing.

With the nighttime city in the background and the lights of the shops and streetlights as his backlight, the tall figure targeted Hiba.

Amazing, thought Hiba. *He always uses his full strength to defeat his opponent.*

He fully focused on the fight and produced the greatest movements, power, and speed he could.

This was how he had forced back Abram and the others and reached the lowest level during the attack on UCAT.

With the enemy before him, Hiba had another thought.

...Can I become like that too?

Could he become that strong?

Hajji did not have the divine protection Izumo did. Nor did he put up with the kind of pain Sayama did.

But even without the stopping power of his eye, he would still be powerful. His physical build was a part of that, but he primarily fought with nothing more than his own body.

No one in UCAT had defeated him one-on-one.

So, thought Hiba.

I want him to be a hero.

I don't want him to create a false version of himself because he couldn't protect what mattered most to him. I want him to protect what matters most to him even if it means creating a false version of himself.

And isn't that what he did during the attack and during the meeting?

...Wasn't he a hero going by the name of a villain?

Hajji had claimed to have set up bombs when negotiating with Sayama.

Hiba was certain he had intended to press that button.

But in the end, he had not pressed it.

Why not? wondered Hiba.

If he would have pressed it had been willing to press it, then...

...He changed his mind.

Hidden below the surface, this enemy had the will needed to *not* press the button.

And he still did. No matter what methods Hiba used, the man was willing to receive them.

He seemed to be saying that was the proof of a truly powerful warrior.

And the man sped up his counterattack. At this rate, Hiba would be unable to reach him.

So Hiba took action. He too sped up, but once he saw he would not make it, he used his next power.

"Yonkichi-san!"

●

A moment later, Hiba and Hajji switched places.

Hiba stood still where Hajji had been and Hajji raced toward Hiba from where the boy had been.

The situation was simple: Hajji was moving his weapon forward while approaching Hiba.

So Hiba leaned forward.

"———!!"

And he closed the gap between them.

He used their relative speeds. Hajji had been given Hiba's speed and Hiba created that speed in himself once more, so they rapidly approached.

But even after that, Hajji was faster.

“Ohhh!”

Before Hiba could reach the man, the muscles of Hajji’s right shoulder swelled out and he thrust his spear forward.

“Go forth, light and darkness of my mother world!!”

As he shouted, B-Sp’s flames and his eye’s stopping power shot toward Hiba.

Hiba did not have time to evade, so they were sure to hit.

●

Hajji realized he had released his power.

This excellent enemy had faced him head-on and he had overcome the speed that was that enemy’s greatest asset.

…What will you do about that?

Hajji silently asked while looking at the flying flames, the expanded stopping power, and Hiba beyond them.

…What will you do about that!?

He had launched the perfect attack to overcome this enemy.

“Can your desperation overcome my best!?”

A moment later, Hajji saw Hiba display his final power.

He threw a blue sphere from behind him. That sphere raised all attack power to maximum.

But, thought Hajji. *What will he do with that?*

Hiba was unarmed.

While he might be able to negate B-Sp and the stopping power with his two fists, his arms would be destroyed and his defeat made certain.

But in the following instant, Hajji saw Hiba throw two weapons.

They were…

“Philosopher’s stones!?”

“Yes,” answered Hiba. “These are the pieces of Mikage-san’s evolution stone!!”

As if to protect Hiba, the pair of blue stones flew with maximum attack power and collided with the flames and stopping power.

And they destroyed them.

The flames and stopping power were shattered by the evolution stones that protected him.

“———!!”

Hiba’s momentum carried him right up to Hajji.

●

Hiba clenched both his fists and stepped forward.

Mikage could no longer evolve, but she would wake up.

One day, surely she would wake up.

That had already been determined. And once she did, he would be with her.

And at the moment, he felt she had protected him.

He also felt what he had done was selfish, but…

…If I don’t do this, I can’t protect her!

He avoided Hajji’s B-Sp just before it reached his face.

His bandana tore and the night air reached his forehead.

He had not felt this sensation in a long while. He had worn the bandana ever since being unable to protect Mikage so long ago, but he felt like it had just been removed for the very first time.

The chilly air seemed to wake him up and told himself to redo things.

Even if Mikage could no longer evolve, they could begin much like they had when they had first met, but redone as the people they were now.

And…

…I need to face Miki!

He would not run. He might hesitate or feel doubt, but he would no longer run away.

He would not fear fighting or try to avoid it and he would try to listen to what she had to say.

And to do that…

“…!”

He stepped forward and sent his fist forward.

In the instant of impact, he saw a smile of resignation on Hajji’s face as the man looked down at him.

Hiba had not hesitated.

He simply produced the greatest strike he possessed.

“————!!”

And he let out a roar.

Even after he was the only one left standing atop the hill, his wavering roar continued on and on without end.

Chapter 42

“Their Respective Conclusions”

The two of us are close
And that is exactly why we are so distant

●

People remained in the Kinugasa Library even after night fell.

A lot of the school's students lived in the dorms and the year-end festival had a lot of late-night stands and events because no one had to worry about tests or classes. And with the chill of winter outside, people naturally filled the library which doubled as a large rest area.

Currently, Shinjou sat across from one of those guests.

"Why are you here, Ryouko-san?"

Ryouko's outfit consisted of a leather jacket over her kimono.

"Hm? We run a stand here every year. All of the shops in the area do. We sponsor the festival, you know? I think Kouji's running a yakisoba stand today. He said something about it being superb since he has someone from the dish's homeland working on it. How about we go mooch some off of him later, Setsu-chan?"

What country is yakisoba from? wondered Shinjou, but she decided not to ask.

Ryouko looked around and smiled.

"But you know what? This is my first time at the school's festival."

"Really?"

"I think I had some issues holding me back."

She waved a hand with a smile, rested her head on her hand, and continued looking around.

"I was really missing out."

She looked deeper into the library where students from the weightlifting club were cosplaying as nudists and getting into a philosophical argument with the public morals committee over whether their state of undress counted as a costume or not.

"We only look nude because you're looking with your eyes! Stop being so filthy and look at us with the eyes of your heart!!"

"You look just as naked to our hearts!!"

The public morals committee wielded stun guns and the muscular nudist cosplayers held barbell weights like cymbals. An excited crowd gathered around them and Ryouko gave a comment while watching from the side.

"Can't they just hide their crotches behind those round weights? Right, Setsu-chan?"

"D-don't ask me about that… And if they did, what do they do with the bars?"

Ryouko stared up at the ceiling and thought for about three seconds before a surprised look came over her.

"Wow, you're so dirty, Setsu-chan!!"

"H-how!? I am not dirty!"

However, Ryouko bent back as if she could not endure that response.

"You! Pass!!"

She then slapped Shinjou on the shoulder.

…She's a lot like an old man.

Ryouko laughed, leaned back forward, and looked at Shinjou.

She then suddenly looked down at the desk in front of Shinjou.

Shinjou had placed a laptop and something else there.

"Setsu-chan, what's that pile of paper?"

"Hm?"

Shinjou looked down at the paper that was still warm from when she had printed it off.

The stack was over ten centimeters thick and had the same full softness as fresh-baked bread. Each page had about twenty lines of text on the left and right sides.

It was a novel.

It was the novel she had written and just now finished.

When she realized Ryouko had noticed it and remembered what she had accomplished, she could not keep her cheeks from relaxing.

"Well… I made one."

"A baby!?"

"You would fit in pretty well at this school, you know!?"

"Really!? Then I think I'll enroll! I'll be your and the young master's underclassman starting next year, okay?"

Their raised voices drew the attention of the surrounding people and the nudist cosplayers.

A naked third year placed his weight-holding hands on his hips and frowned their way.

"Now, now, you two. You need to stay quiet in the library."

“But…you can be naked?”
“What does nudity have to do with being quiet?”
“Understood,” weakly replied Shinjou as she and Ryouko bowed.
After about seven seconds, Ryouko leaned her way and looked at the novel.
“That’s the first time I’ve been scolded by a naked person. Now, let’s get back on topic. …So it’s a novel?”
“Yes.”
Hearing that, Ryouko’s eyes opened wide and she straightened up.
“Wow. You wrote all this?”
“I-is it that much? I knew what I wanted to write and, when I let it all out, it ended up like this…”
Ryouko nodded and gave an impressed cry.
“So you had a whole bunch building up inside you and you worked hard to get it all out of you?”
“D-don’t say things people will take the wrong way, Ryouko-san.”
However, Shinjou could sense what Ryouko meant.
The woman was surprised and was praising her.
Ryouko of course did not know *what* Shinjou had written.
And Shinjou had no intention of getting it published. It was just a personal hobby.
However, Ryouko had commented on the mere fact that she had written a novel.
I see, she thought.
…I’m being praised for something I did myself.
She did not know what that meant, but it briefly reminded her of the previous night.
They had done something for the world and that would link them all together.
And just now she had made Ryouko think something about her.
“…Is that how it works?”
She nodded and woke from her thoughts to see Ryouko give an impressed sigh and look back and forth.
“Is the young master at work?”
“Yes. I don’t think he’ll be back until late at night today.”
“I see,” said Ryouko. “Want to go get some yakisoba from Kouji?”
Shinjou started to wonder if she should, but Ryouko said something more.
“Shi-chan’s helping him right now, so should I call for her?”
“Shino-san is?”
It surprised her to know that girl was at the festival.
And she also knew Sayama was inside a concept space set up within the school.
He had chosen the location of his beginning for the final showdown.
Shinjou did not know who his opponent would be, but it would definitely be someone Shino knew.
…It might be bad if she notices.
So Shinjou shook a hand side to side.
“Um, no, thanks. Yeah, you don’t have to buy me any yakisoba.”
“Really?”
Ryouko’s doubtful tone meant she did not believe Shinjou, so Shinjou panicked a little and stood up.
“Oh, but maybe I should go take a look. Then I can decide if I’m in the mood.”
“So I’ll be waiting here?”
Ryouko shrugged and looked to the laptop and pile of paper.
“Can I read it?”
“Sorry, but I already know who I want to read it first.”
“It’s the young master, isn’t it?”
She asked with a smile and Shinjou smiled back and nodded.
“I’ll be right back,” she said while rushing toward the library exit.
As she did, she wondered what Sayama and the others were doing at the moment.

●

A dividing line between light and darkness existed on the edge of the festival.
The light was filled with enjoyment while the darkness supported that light from outside.
That borderline between light and darkness was made up of festival stands surrounding the dancing ground.

One stand on the southwest end of the large schoolyard was selling yakisoba. Its sign said “Festival Stand Detective – Yakisoban” as well as “Agedama Blade”.

The stand was run by a foreigner who spoke a mysterious Swahili-like language, someone in a red and yellow Festival Stand Detective costume with lots of lit decorations, a young man easily speaking with them in Japanese, and a girl sitting in a seat next to them and chopping vegetables.

The detective costume must have been hot inside because he would occasionally crouch down and stop moving, but it did not affect the stand.

The transistor radio hanging from the top of the stand informed them it was now half past six.

After handing a customer their change, the young man looked to the girl.

He pulled a few coins from the bamboo basket he kept the change in and held them out toward the girl.

She turned around and was noticeably surprised to see the coins. She tried to refuse a few times, but the young man pointed at himself, the foreigner mixing soba with amazing skill, and the detective directly cooling himself by shoving his head in a bucket of water. He then held out the coins again.

The girl still hesitated, but she did take the coins.

She held them tightly as something precious and a gentle smile came to her lips.

She then grabbed the crutch leaning against the chair and began to walk.

She bowed toward the men in the stand, placed her jacket over her shoulders, and opened the canopy placed over the side of the stand.

Supported by the crutch, she seemed to move away from the darkness behind her.

She walked into the light and all the people there.

●

The school was empty.

Only the reserve lights and the outside lights were on, so the schoolyard was poorly lit.

However, a few forms were visible on the athletic grounds in front of the school building.

One was a boy in a suit.

The other was a girl in an armored uniform.

And the others…

“The Concept Cores have gathered here.”

The boy turned toward the transport pallets and the swords stabbed into the schoolyard.

“Are you all here to see the conclusion?”

As if to agree with the girl, the Concept Cores all glowed faintly. It was a pale light, much like moonlight.

“My side has 7th-Gear’s Dragon Balls and 9th-Gear’s B-Sp,” said the boy. “And you…”

He looked at the forms that resembled differently sized towers.

“3rd-Gear’s Keravnos and 5th-Gear’s Vesper Cannon, hm?”

“You cannot judge them based on their size. And the other four Concept Cores are surrounding the two of us. …This must mean there were two draws, one victory, and one defeat. In other words, the world is still in equilibrium.”

The boy looked to the sword standing before him.

It was a wooden sword, but it had not been carved. It was a branch that had naturally taken that form.

“Mukiti chose this and resides within it, so that he could ‘be with Sayama’.”

“Then,” replied the girl with a long sword standing before her as well. “I will take Totsuka, 2nd-Gear’s Concept Core. I will use the power of my name…and carve life.”

She seemed to be asking for confirmation in the dim light, but the boy only nodded at first.

“I see,” he said before tilting his head. “Where is your dog?”

“He is not my dog and I did not want anyone to think I had help here, so I had him wait at the concept space’s boundary.”

“The students with nothing better to do will be unable to leave him alone. Those who live in the dorms are always starving for a pet.”

“They eat dogs?”

“You just said something amazing, you know?”

“Did I?” She smiled a bit and must have recalled the festival outside. “But anyway, this is a nice place.”

“It is,” agreed the boy.

The two of them then slowly breathed in and reached for the weapons in front of them.

“Sayama Mikoto, Low-Gear Representative and ruler of the world.”

“Toda Mikoku, Top-Gear Representative and someone who wants to live a simple life.”

After naming themselves, they prepared their weapons.

“En garde!!”

●

Shino walked through the festival with her crutch.

She was on the way back from buying four canned drink she held under her left arm below the jacket draped over her shoulders.

…Kouji said I could buy something and eat it, but…

She had not known what would be best to buy, so she had instead had fun seeing as much as she could.

The schoolyard was large and there was a dance at the center. Their stand was to the southwest and the vending machines were near the school buildings to the north. She had intentionally chosen the longer counterclockwise route to the east, so it had taken her nearly half an hour.

After making her purchase, she had taken the shorter western route instead.

On the way, she had seen the general pattern of the stands.

There was yakisoba, takoyaki, okonomiyaki, water candy, chocolate bananas, candied apples, target practice, human target practice, die cutting, 3D figurine die cutting, string lottery, nude string lottery, fortunetelling, and “exciting” fortunetelling.

Shino had seen a lot of it on her way there, but it was all new enough to her that it still felt fresh.

In the distance, she heard a muffled moan followed by a ringing bell.

“We have a first prize winner in the nude string lottery! Oh, they’re passing out. They’re really passing out!”

Someone was lucky, thought Shino with a deep nod.

A soccer goal had been moved almost to the edge of the schoolyard. It was shoved between two stands and it seemed really big to Shino.

Also…

“Why is there a surfboard here?”

A surfboard was stuck in the ground about sixty centimeters from the edge of the schoolyard. It almost looked like some kind of sign, but then she noticed a color there.

It was the color white. It was the color of a beast. Despite all the food stands surrounding it, the color intently faced the center of the festival.

“…Shiro?”

The large dog turned toward her.

Its black eyes looked at her and they both reacted.

Shiro gave a start, suddenly got up, and ran toward her.

Shino gasped and watched the dog approach without moving.

“Why are you here?”

Deep down, she knew the answer.

She had last seen Shiro on the night of the attack. The landslide had separated them.

And who had been with them then?

…No.

She told herself to forget it, that this was not the time to approach that, and that she needed to think about something else.

“____”

The next thing she knew, Shiro had circled around to her left. Without looking at her face, he pressed his shoulder to her waist and tried to push. It was almost as if he was trying to move her away from the center of the festival.

That clued Shino in

“Is she…in the festival?”

Shiro did not answer. He simply tried to push her away from the festival.

And as Shino looked to the center of the dancing, she realized something.

…No, she isn’t actually in the festival.

The person who she was still not willing to draw up from the depths her heart was not skillful enough to dance with these Low-Gear people.

She was someone who could not face Shino until she had settled everything.

She was someone who refused to face her even though she knew it was a necessary part of settling everything.

She was someone who refused to face her not *despite* the power she had, but *because of* that power.

She was someone who believed she would harm someone and something precious.

Shino knew she would not be here now if that person had faced her.

Shino knew she would also not be here if she had tried to face that person.

That person refused to face this world and thus could not dance with this world.

She refused to face them but desired to fight them.

She thought she only had to avoid harming what mattered most to her, so she fought without even looking at those precious things.

And so she would choose to fight somewhere where no one could see her.

…A concept space.

Shiro knew where she was and what she was trying to do.

…Is it a showdown between Low-Gear and Top-Gear?

Sayama and Shinjou had said they were searching the past in order to oppose Top-Gear.

That meant they were going to settle everything once and for all.

…It can't be…

Shino sensed a certain conclusion.

"Mikoku is fighting to end it all?"

She realized the cans had fallen from her left arm.

That hand was now holding the blue stone that hung from her neck.

That cracked stone had lost most of its power, but…

…I can still enter a concept space one more time!

She started forward with her crutch, but Shiro held her back.

He seemed to be telling her not to go and not to stop the conclusion that so many people wanted.

"Shiro! Please…"

She raised her voice, tried to move her knee forward, was pushed back, and realized something was getting in her way.

A moment later, she threw away the crutch.

Strength filled her trembling left leg and she brushed the dog out of the way.

"Shiro…please. Mikoku might leave me!"

She took the blue stone from her neck and wrapped her left hand's fingers around it.

She thrust it forward with her left palm as if pressing it into midair.

"Let me go! I need to…"

She released the thought she had tried to seal in the bottom of her heart.

"I need to stop the conclusion Mikoku has chosen!"

●

Shinjou saw a girl and a white dog near the gap between festival stands created by a soccer goal.

The dog was the one that had accompanied Mikoku.

"———!"

Shinjou reflexively broke into a run. An uncertain but bad feeling filled her chest.

She was about fifteen meters away, so it would not take her long to get there.

She assumed she would make it if she ran, but the girl was already moving.

Shinjou saw the girl raise her left hand toward the center of the festival with a tearful and desperate look on her face.

…She threw away her crutch!

When she took a weak step and reached out toward the festival, Shinjou cried out.

"Wait! Someone…stop her!!"

But her voice did not reach anyone.

There was sound.

There was light.

A firework had been launched into the sky from the bonfire at the center of the festival.

It whistled up into the midwinter night sky and the explosion briefly filled the festival with blue light.

"———"

The girl had vanished.

Only the white dog remained, tail lowered and looking bored.

Shinjou gulped.

She let out a rough breath and pulled her cellphone from her pocket.

With eyebrows raised, she clenched and ground her teeth, using the sound to suppress her emotions.

“Sibyl-san! We need backup! Send everyone out!”

“!? …Wh-what do you mean? Don’t tell me it’s Ooshiro-sama again.”

“This might be worse than that…”

“Y-you mean the entire earth is about to be destroyed?”

“That’s not what I mean,” began Shinjou as she slowly chose her words. “Someone’s trying to get in the way of Sayama-kun’s conclusion.”

She thought about what she had seen and what it meant.

She wondered if it was what she had actually wanted to do.

“An intruder entered the concept space.”

“An intruder?”

“Yes,” confirmed Shinjou.

She chose not to say anything more, hung up, and looked to her left arm.

A black watch was strapped to her wrist.

●

Mikoku moved through the night.

The battlefield was a school.

The school was empty and it was nighttime.

But if one looked closely, faint shadows of people were visible.

A festival was underway beyond the concept space.

Mikoku did not overlook the presence of those people.

She ran across the schoolyard, attacked, threw a knife to put some distance between herself and her opponent, and dashed inside a school building.

Darkness covered everything, but human shadows moved through that darkness as well.

It was not difficult to imagine the sounds they made as they moved.

Two faint shadows stood in the hallway ahead of her, but what were they discussing?

…They are peeking inside the classroom in front of them, aren’t they?

A shadow stood at the wall to the side of the stairs, presumably waiting for someone.

As Mikoku ran up the stairs, a shadow rushed down them and seemed to be riding a bicycle despite being indoors.

Everyone moved out of the bike’s way and a few raised their arms and seemed to be saying something.

Mikoku smiled bitterly because it felt like she was a part of their group.

She imagined she was participating in the festival.

She crossed blades with the person who either pursued her or was pursued by her and imagined participating in the festival as the blow shook her body.

No one noticed her.

No one turned toward her.

No one said anything to her.

But, she thought. *This is easier on me. After all, I don’t have to hurt anyone this way.*

To avoid her enemy’s next attack, she made a feint toward a classroom.

They exchanged attacked as one pursued and one turned around.

She used her skill, judgment, and physical strength to swing her sword from her lowered stance. She sliced through the ceiling and wall but was unable to hit her opponent.

“———”

While falling back and making her sword strike, she saw a window to her left.

It was a classroom window.

The classroom was too small for this kind of fight and the window was the one view out of it.

The thick window blocked her way and she was bound to this fight by obligation, but…

…Everything looks so calm out there!

She of course had a view of the school at night. The next school building cast a dark shadow and the moon had risen in the dark blue sky.

But in her imagination, Mikoku participated in the festival.

While inside the classroom and listening to the clashing of swords, she thought.

…This is the windowsill at the very end of the line.

It would have felt nice to rest her head in her hand and stare out that window.

She then realized she probably would not have been able to speak with anyone even if she had gone to school. She was sure she would have remained silent and stared out the window.

…All while wondering what I could do or if I was alone.

She had continued to wander through the supposed freedom of not going to school, so if she had been faced with even more guidelines, would she have hesitated even more?

But, she thought.

She had lost her world, naturally wished to fight, worried over so very much, and was now fighting.

…But if I had gone to school, I definitely would have ended up staring out a window like that one.

No matter her situation, she felt that would not have changed much.

No one would have spoken to her, she would have been fine with that, and she would have found herself walking through the festival all alone.

She would have been alone, but she still would have felt like she was participating by walking through it.

That would have made her painfully aware that she was a part of this world.

If she had bought something at a festival stand, it would have been proof of her existence.

It would have been proof that she was an element of the festival.

…I am such a cheap person.

She liked things simple.

Or maybe I am surprisingly spoiled, she thought as she swung her sword outside of her imagination.

A close look showed a faint shadow cut by in front of her.

It was likely a waitress for the café being run from the classroom. The shadow on her hand had to be a tray.

Mikoku directed her attack around the waitress.

Her opponent received the attack and made an attack of his own, but his slash was the same as hers.

"…"

She realized that both of them had been avoiding the faint shadows throughout the entire fight.

…Are you participating in the festival, too?

In a way, treating the unseen and invisible no differently from anything else was restrictive.

As they fought, they eliminated the primary advantage of the empty concept space.

But what is wrong with that? thought Mikoku as she ran out into the hallway.

Her enemy pursued and she made an attack from behind the door, but his wooden sword passed over his head to block her blade with a solid sound.

She back-stepped and rushed down the hallway toward the emergency staircase.

She held back her opponent by throwing a knife hidden on the back of her armored uniform.

She then reached backwards while making sure not to get in the way of the barely-visible shadows.

She reached toward the end of the hallway and the emergency exit.

She grabbed the knob, turned it as her enemy approached, and pressed her back against it to move the heavy door.

"——————"

She ran outside onto the concrete emergency staircase and sensed something.

It was not the night air, the moonlight, the wind, or the darkness.

She only sensed a broader version of the scene glimpsed through the classroom window, the height of her vantage point, and…

…Yes.

From that second story landing, she looked out on the schoolyard, the neighboring school building, the people there, the scenes of morning, noon, and night that had to exist there, and the current festival.

She imagined it all.

And she sensed something about this place.

…It is a little different.

This was not a classroom, it was not closed off, and it gave a splendid view.

There were other elevated spots and other locations exposed to the breeze, but this was the only one a few steps from the classroom.

She was certain someone had a habit of gathering here.

People who found their position inside the school to be somewhat lacking would come here as a privilege of knowing about it, and they would speak with the people walking down below and the people who arrived through the door.

She suddenly realized some writing in the schoolyard sand plastered on the wall.

…What is this?

She tried to check the ten or so lines of text, but the door suddenly opened before her.

It was her enemy.

“So you will not let me take my time!?”

She clicked her tongue once, intercepted with her sword, and thought as she immediately jumped down from the landing.

This was a fun time, but the festival would eventually end.

…How will the festival end?

She knew how it needed to happen.

Deep in her heart, she pictured a certain girl for the briefest of moments.

She was certain that girl would be happy and that her happiness was completely unrelated to Top-Gear or Low-Gear.

So Mikoku carved into herself a method to end this that would allow for that.

She had a power of her own.

And as she sensed her parents with her here, she made up her mind.

This was a conclusion that only she could bring about.

●

Sayama ran alongside Mikoku as he chased her into the schoolyard.

He slipped through the dancing and rotating shadows, spun around in his pursuit of Mikoku, and was sometimes pursued himself.

…What a strange opponent.

He felt her skill with the sword was a bit higher than his own. He was a skilled martial artist, but he simply did not have as much experience with swords.

Rather than blocking and striking back, Mikoku more often evaded and charged in or evaded and moved away.

She primarily fought at close range, as if assuming she could always dodge.

…Perhaps that is due to her regeneration concept.

Even if she could not avoid an attack, it would not be fatal for her.

But a normal person was different.

If they failed to avoid an attack and the blade cut even a centimeter into their wrist, they would never hold a sword again.

She did not need to worry about that, but…

…Oddly enough, I sense no carelessness in her.

According to Gyes, Mikoku’s regeneration had reached abnormal speeds. She had speculated that not even the mechanical speed of the automatons would be enough to fully destroy Mikoku.

For Mikoku itself, it would have distanced her from death.

She could afford to be careless.

And yet she moved vigorously and confidently while making sure to avoid the surrounding shadows, as if following Sayama’s own lead there.

…She is not careless. She is confident.

She knew that she would not die and that she was protected by her power, so had that relief widened her field of vision?

This is dangerous, he thought.

When people on the verge of death were shown their impending doom, they generally gave up and fell into that doom. When they knew they were on the verge of death in the first place, they would give up more quickly when it was placed right before their eyes.

It was the ones who overcame that fate that were the most dangerous. Even when death was right before their eyes, they would sometimes fail to notice it or shrug it off as irrelevant.

Mikoku had taken a step into that territory.

…This is bad.

However, there were a few ways to defeat someone with powerful regeneration.

To regenerate was to not die, but that still allowed them to be defeated or beaten.

Grabbing and restricting their joints would prevent them from moving, which was enough for victory.

Strangling them and cutting off their brain’s oxygen supply would knock them unconscious, which was also a way to victory.

Both were an extension of martial arts and something he excelled at.

That was why he stayed close to her but backed away when she got too close.

And at the moment, he moved in to attack.

She would occasionally throw a knife to keep him away, but he kept up with her otherwise.

Before long, the two of them reached the center of the schoolyard.
Mikoku was to the south and Sayama to the north.
They were both near their staring points, their heavy breathing appeared white in the air, and they were covered in sweat.
“There is…”
“…no need to stop.”
They spoke in unison and they both leaned forward.
“…!”
They ran toward the conclusion.
They ran toward the conclusion of the world they both supported.

●

“The clashing of swords sounds wonderful.”
A voice joined the sound of wood on metal and the sound of quick evasions.
“It is a nice sound.”
One or the other of them spoke from the darkness and shadows.
“To be honest, I have no real grudge against you.”
The other replied as if accepting those words.
“I feel similarly about you. You are my opposite, but I have no further connection to you.”
Their swords clanged together.
“Then why are we fighting?”
Their feet sounded loudly on the ground.
“Because our respective positions demand it.”
They stepped away from each other on the sand and raised their swords.
“Then it would seem we both enjoy troublesome things.”
The metal sword produced a metallic noise.
“We may be similar.”
The other took a step.
“If we are similar, are two of us really necessary?”
They moved forward.
“If you could fulfill my role, then perhaps not.”
The wooden sword attacked.
“It is too bad.”
The metal sword attacked.
“We have reached an impasse.”
The wood blocked and repelled.
“There are enjoyments that only I can do. …What about you?”
Next, the metal blocked and repelled.
“Yes, I too have things that only I can do.”
The opponent spun around to attack repeatedly.
“And you cannot give them up?”
Footsteps blocked them with a wind of evasion.
“I cannot.”
A pursuing strike rang out.
“Nor can I.”
A second strike followed.
“If neither of us can give those things up, then what are we fighting for?”
Someone side-flipped over the ground to dodge.
“That should be obvious.”
They stood and began to move again.
“To ensure the things which we cannot give up.”
They pursued.
“I see.”
They pursued some more.
“I am glad you were my opponent.”

One of them ran.
“Crushing something which someone refuses to give up will pain my great heart, but…”
The other also ran.
“You are willing to do so if it is your other self?”
One moved in to attack.
“Yes, that is right.”
They attacked each other.
“Hey… What were our parents like in your world?”
They evaded at the same time.
“What about in yours?”
They attacked at the same time.
“So they were the same.”
They locked swords at the same time.
“Yes, they must have been the same.”
The two weapons creaked from the strain they put on each other.
“Hey, don’t you think this fight might be meaningless?”
A short silence followed.
“What a coincidence. But don’t you also think that this fight can be given meaning?”
One of them breathed in.
“Then…”
They repelled each other to put some distance between them.
“Yes, you understand, don’t you? The two who will cause the least possible damage to the world should settle this.”
As soon as they landed, they kicked off the sand to dash.
“Hey, Sayama Mikoto.”
Running footsteps approached.
“What, Toda Mikoku?”
They continued to approach.
“Are we the same?”
The approached without end.
“Well…”
They approached too close to measure.
“Answer me.”
They prepared their weapons.
“We are…”
The wooden sword was held at the ready on the left side.
“…the same.”
The metal sword was raised up and back in two hands.
“We are the same person.”
And the two swords were swung.
“We are nothing more than that.”

●

Mikoku swung her sword straight down toward Sayama.
Her sword could carve life, but he did not hesitate.
He stepped forward and drew his wooden sword from a crouched stance.
Getting the distance of a sword strike right was tricky while running, but he calmly pulled it off.
His blade would arrive directly below the wide crescent moon arc of hers, but it would not arrive in time.
She briefly narrowed her eyes, but followed through with her attack.
She immediately heard a certain sound.
It was the dull sound of something tearing into the ground.
She then saw Sayama charging toward her from his lowered stance.
“Totsuka!”
For some reason, Totsuka had not swung all the way down. It had instead stopped about a meter off the ground.
The reason was obvious: Mukiti’s wooden sword.

Sayama's weapon was stabbed into the ground like a stake.
He had not been preparing to attack Mikoku with it.
He had instead drawn Totsuka in and caught it on the bottom of Mukiti.
Totsuka's power attempted to carve into the life of the wooden sword, but…
"————!"
Air blew out as it resisted. The powers of two Concept Cores collided, trembled, and cried out.
"!"
Mikoku reflexively fell back with Totsuka in hand.
In that instant, Sayama straightened up after charging in below Totsuka.
His left shoulder hit the weapon and tore his clothing, but he continued running regardless.
His forward movement cut his clothing further and blood sprayed from his shoulder.
"By the name of Mikoto, I command the concepts of 2nd-Gear."
He punched Totsuka's blade from below.
"Fly!!"
Mikoku realized her weapon had flown up and out of her hands.
She had been holding Totsuka's hilt, so her arms were pulled up and her body left wide open.
Sayama charged toward her and she immediately realized this could lead to the conclusion she desired.

●

Sayama did not hesitate.
He threw a right hook into Mikoku's gut.
"…!"
Just as she doubled over and her chin lowered, he unclenched his left fist.
"———"
And he threw a chop.
It hit.
Her face wobbled and her body was knocked backwards thanks to the previous hit.
The flat-handed blow to the chin had shaken her head on her neck.
The greater the speed, the more her brain was shaken in her skull and the more control she lost.
This was known as a concussion and that was what had happened to Mikoku.
She might still have had control of her limbs, but with her brain taken out, she would not be able to stand.
But to win, Sayama would need to pin her down or something along those lines.
That was the way to defeat this immortal girl, this other version of himself, without giving her a chance to resist.
And at about the same time, he heard a sound.
It was the sound of breaking wood and it came from Mukiti's wooden sword.
To the left, mist rose from the broken sword and it moved like a cobra rearing its head.
"!"
It flew toward the collection of Concept Cores to their right, where Mukiti's small transportation pallet waited.
According to the rules, he would lose if he lost the Concept Core.
But Totsuka had been knocked into the air and Mikoku was unable to fight, so if he restrained her here…
…It will be a tie.
Everything would end in equilibrium.
And…
"That is the conclusion I wanted!"
Sayama had decided he would not allow a division between winner and loser, even if he had to force it.
He was prepared to do whatever it took to ensure everyone was on equal footing.
Low-Gear and Top-Gear had their own circumstances and righteousness.
…But we must face each other and accept that we are equal!
They had held a trial and fought, so he felt there could be nothing more they had to do. And…
"You feel the same, don't you!?"
He shouted his question and ran over as Mikoku's knees gave out and she began to collapse.
But…
"———!?"
As he started forward, Sayama saw hostility before his eyes.

It was the tip of a blade.

It was a knife.

It was one Mikoku had hidden on the back of her armored uniform.

He reflexively jumped back.

“!”

And he grabbed the knife from midair.

His eyes had focused on the blade and it took them a brief moment to focus back on the girl.

In that vague but instantaneous time, he asked a question in his heart.

…Why?

The question came from the knife in his hand.

She had to have thrown the knife after letting go of Totsuka.

It would have been when her arms were raised, leaving her body unguarded. She had to have thrown the blade while receiving his attack.

But, he thought. *That is not something she could have suddenly decided to do.*

At the very least, she had to have made the decision before the pair of attacks leading to the concussion.

And that suggested something to Sayama.

…Did she predict my attack?

But that question brought two new questions.

First, if she had predicted it, why had she let it hit?

And second, what had she been trying to do by taking an attack that would keep her from moving?

At the same time, his eyes focused on what lay before him.

From seven meters away, he saw Mikoku collapsing backwards as her knees lost their strength.

But that was not all.

Only then did he realize what she was trying to do.

She held a knife in her right hand.

As she fell, she forcibly moved her right arm via brute strength.

A moment later, Sayama saw his other self swing her blade.

Having predicted what she would do, he cried out.

“Wait!”

She held the knife in a backhand grip and pressed it against the back of her own head.

He heard a dull sound as she plunged the knife up to the base into the back right side of her neck.

“!!”

And she pulled it forward, toward Sayama.

She was trying to cut through her medulla oblongata to reset the trembling of the concussion.

“———”

And she did just that.

●

Mikoku felt her mind grow instantly clear, so she calmly stood up.

She had a smile on her face and sweat covered her brow, but she kept her eyes pointed straight forward.

Totsuka spun as it fell from overhead and the pieces of the wooden sword lay abandoned on the ground.

Now that she was alive and could move, the result was obvious.

“If I catch Totsuka as it falls, I suppose I will win.”

Sayama shook his head and remained in a defensive stance.

“Wait.”

“I will not wait. If I catch that sword, I will win.”

She extended her right hand up toward the falling blade.

She slowly bent backwards as she did.

“Sayama Mikoto, you were attempting to incapacitate me so that we would tie, weren’t you? It is true that I cannot be defeated in any other way…generally, anyway.”

“…Wait.”

Sayama took a half step forward, but she shook her head.

She tried to catch Totsuka as it spun down from directly overhead, but he gave a shout at that exact moment.

“Wait, Toda Mikoku!”

“I will not wait. I made the same decision as you…but chose a different method.”

She had her own way of bringing the world into equilibrium.

“I know my only skill lies in fighting and that everyone sees me as Top-Gear’s final leader.”

So…

“Sorry, but I will take all of the responsibility onto myself. …Accept this tie and forgive them all. You understand, don’t you? Even Hajji was a victim.”

“Wait!!” shouted Sayama. “Death is the worst possible option, Toda Mikoku!!”

As he stepped toward her, she threw a knife with her left hand to keep him away.

With both her arms raised, she spread those arms, leaned back, and left her chest entirely defenseless to the falling bearer of the conclusion.

Totsuka.

In this concept space, that sword was aligned with the one whose name carved life.

The metal tip fell to pierce her chest and the philosopher’s stone embedded there.

Her regeneration power and her life were there.

But Totsuka’s blade could carve life, so if it broke the philosopher’s stone and stabbed her, she would die.

This was the conclusion Mikoku desired.

If she was gone, Top-Gear would lose its leader. Shino would choose a life of happiness and so would Tatsumi. Even Alex would be able to live out his remaining life in peace.

And if she bore all responsibility herself, Hajji and the others who had fought alongside her would not be harmed.

Low-Gear would be unable to demand any other sacrifices or anything else unreasonable.

She was still worried about the negative concepts, but if Noah began to wake up, she was certain that *Noah herself* would do something about it.

…It will be okay.

Shino was not by her side, but with her parents’ power inside her, she was not alone.

That knowledge was enough.

Even if she lost her life, she would not feel lonely.

Her fight would end here.

So she raised her head toward the heavens and held her chest up toward the blade that would pierce her.

●

Just before it all happened, a girl rushed onto the battlefield.

She ran a short distance to charge in from outside the field of vision of the two focused on themselves.

“No!”

The girl embraced Mikoku who was trying to end it all by taking her own life.

She embraced her, pushed, and a moment later, the falling metal sword pierced through her bent back and toward her chest.

With a dull sound, the girl stopped moving as if she had tripped forward and her outstretched arms clung tightly to Mikoku.

After a rustling of cloth, the sword in her back collapsed under its own weight.

It fell toward the girl’s waist, which also moved the girl.

It moved the girl’s raised body closer to Mikoku.

The movement was accompanied by a wet sound as the thick blade sank into her gut and fell out through her back.

The sound of the sword falling to the sand-covered ground rang heavily through the air.

Afterwards, only a breath could be heard.

It sounded like all air was leaving the girl’s lungs.

●

Mikoku did not understand.

What had just happened before her eyes?

What had happened to her?

Why was Shino here?

Why had Shino stopped her?

She did not understand any of that, but she did understand one thing: what was going to happen to Shino now.

Mikoku stood in a daze as Shino leaned up against her. Her bent arms caught on Mikoku's armored uniform and she finally managed to stand on her trembling legs.

But Mikoku did not know what to do.

"Ah…"

Only a tenseness that was not even a breath escaped her throat.

But she could feel the heat and trembling coming from Shino.

Shino's heat was spilling on Mikoku's stomach and dripping down her waist and thighs.

…!

She did not know what, why, or how. She could not even go mad, she could not run away, she could not breathe in or out, and so she said nothing. All she could do was somehow listen to Shino's faint voice.

"Mikoku…"

Ah.

"Thank goodness."

How is this good? There is nothing remotely-

"Mikoku, you're a coward, so I thought you might do this. Because you're a coward…"

Wait. Wait. Please wait. Don't…don't say anything.

If you do… If you do… If you say it… If you say it…it will sound like goodb-

"And because you're kind."

She heard a voice say "I'm sorry".

She tried to say "wait" but could not. She could not say it, so she remained silent. And as that silence felt like some kind of punishment, Shino's voice continued with a hint of happiness and even some faint joy mixed in.

"I'd always known it…but it was so obvious…that I'd forgotten."

Shino raised her lowered head.

Don't look at me. Don't. I have no idea what kind of awful look I have on my face.

But Shino did look at her and gave her a smile that made her want to tell her to stop.

"You're actually the kindest person of all, aren't you? That's why you're so fearful and why you try to avoid hurting anyone. …That's who you are, isn't it?"

Shino mouthed the words "I'm sorry".

She closed her eyes as she smiled.

Seeing that smile, Mikoku's face crumpled and she opened her mouth.

"Shino!"

Her voice – her trembling voice – finally escaped.

Shino's eyes opened a bit, but she only nodded with a gentle smile and lowered her head.

"From now on, you can be kind without having to fear, okay? After all… After all, I'm already living without my concept…and everyone is so kind to me."

Shino's body sank into Mikoku's chest. She felt like nothing more than a limp mass of lingering heat.

"I won't be a burden on you anymore, so…"

With those words, the last hint of strength left Shino's body.

So Mikoku embraced her.

And she realized Shino wore a red cloisonné pendant along with her half-broken blue pendant.

She realized Shino had continued to wear it all this time.

●

Sayama found himself collapsed on the ground.

He did not know what had happened.

He remembered trying to stop Mikoku and that she had thrown a knife when he had tried to approach.

Just as he had tried to brush it out of the way, a girl had run out in front of Mikoku.

It had been Shino.

She had likely used an unstable method to enter the concept space because an odd distortion had accompanied her appearance and it had happened so suddenly.

Confused by the sudden event, the knife had approached before his eyes.

"And…"

He looked down at his own collapsed form and found a face there.

He also saw long hair bound by a ribbon and a school uniform.

“Shinjou-kun?”

“…Yes.”

Shinjou smiled bitterly as she clung to his chest.

“Sorry about interrupting.”

Those words left him speechless.

It was true she had interrupted. She had interfered while the representatives of Low-Gear and Top-Gear settled their dispute.

Seeing Shino had surprised him enough to briefly lose sight of the knife, but that was his responsibility. He could not let the interference of someone other than the Low-Gear representative help him avoid a weapon thrown by the Top-Gear representative.

But…

…It is true she saved me.

As he wondered what he should say, he noticed something.

He held up his left hand which had been wrapped around Shinjou’s back.

“Blood…”

Enough dark-red covered his left palm to drip from it.

“Shinjou-kun!”

He got up and realized Shinjou’s body was limp and heavy.

“Shinjou-kun!”

Her bitter smile was the soft expression of someone about to fall asleep.

“Shinjou-kun!!”

He looked past her smile and saw Mikoku’s knife sticking from her back.

It was on the left side of her back and the red stain grew with the same timing as her pulse.

“———!!”

It will be okay. Calm down. Yes, he told himself.

…This situation…

He suddenly remembered his mother.

She too had protected him from an attack and embraced him. What had happened to her afterwards?

“…”

The pain inside him linked with reality.

The pain in his chest linked not to his mother and the others he had lost but instead to Shinjou who he held to his chest.

“…!!”

He embraced her and let out a yell.

●

A pair of cries rang throughout the dark space.

And something answered them.

The girl’s bestial cry was answered by two objects that flew down from the sky.

One was a badly-damaged mechanical dragon and the other was a similarly-damaged white giant.

The white giant fell down almost vertically and the girl standing on its shoulder looked down to the ground.

“Mikoku…”

The girl in Mikoku’s arms was covered in scarlet.

Mikoku’s chest was bared.

She was trying to use a knife to dig out the philosopher’s stone buried at the base of her throat so she could give it to the girl in her arms.

But every wound she made was instantly filled, she could not fulfill her wish, and she simply opened her mouth and wailed.

Her voice sounded like a scream or cry of anguish and the girl falling with the white giant closed her eyes.

She wrinkled her brow and audibly gulped.

“I’m sorry, Alex.”

“Do not apologize, Tatsumi. I am here to make sure you do not have to.”

“I see.” Tatsumi nodded with the ends of her eyebrows lowered. “I will take Mikoku’s side no matter what happens.”

After all…

“My emotions are nothing compared to hers.”

“Neither are mine. If this comes down to a conflict between reason and emotion…then I prefer the latter, Tatsumi.”

“I see,” said Tatsumi with another nod.

She then opened her eyes, looked down at the girl crying on the fast-approaching ground, reached out a hand, and raised her eyebrows.

“Mikoku!!”

Tatsumi gave a shout to drown out the cries coming from the depths of the earth.

“Release your desire! This is a place of conclusion! You are Top-Gear’s representative, so we will follow whatever decision you make!”

Mikoku looked up.

Her eyes wavered from the tears and her hair was a mess, so Tatsumi briefly closed her eyes again.

But Tatsumi quickly brought her expression in order and breathed in to gather strength.

“Wish for whatever it is you desire!!”

At the same time, Alex and the white god of war slammed wind against the earth and landed.

The two of them heard Mikoku’s voice in the whipping wind.

They were quiet yet distinct words.

“Give her back…”

Mikoku shouted words of emotion that were impossible yet that everyone had wished for at some point.

She extended her bloody right hand toward Tatsumi and strongly spread the fingers.

“Give her back!!”

In that instant, Tatsumi closed her eyes, accepted it all, and nodded.

She then took action to grant her leader’s request.

A gust of wind raced across the earth and ascended into the sky.

Final Chapter

“Leading Edge of the Pain”

That voice is not a song

End.

●

The UCAT members were slightly delayed on entering the concept space.

The concept space by the front gate was the closet to the schoolyard concept space, but there was a short gap between the two and the automatons could not leave.

That meant the first to reach Sayama were Hiba and Kazami who had just returned by helicopter.

Small concept spaces had been opened in various spots around the school and helicopters were letting off personnel inside them.

Hiba and Kazami charged into the concept space as the first of those.

“————”

Then they saw and heard what was there.

They were first met by the wind produced by something large flying.

Kazami reached a hand out beyond that pressure of the wind that blew through.

“The Concept Cores!!”

But the objects to which she referred were not there.

Gram, Totsuka, Keravnos, Mukiti, the Vesper Cannon, V-Sw, the four Dragon Balls, Wanambi, B-Sp, and G-Sp2 were all missing. Only one thing remained.

“That voice…” muttered Hiba.

Just as he had said, a single voice rang through the darkness.

It was a great cry.

The extended, lonely wail was directed toward the moon.

The sorrowful voice gave the two of them chills.

And in the center of the courtyard, they saw its source.

It was Sayama.

Even though it would dirty his clothes, he sat on the ground embracing Shinjou’s scarlet-stained body.

Shinjou’s back was moving slightly as she breathed and he pressed his hands to it to keep her from bleeding any more.

His hands were covered in the color red spilling from the person he cared for most, his head simply looked up toward the night sky, and his mouth hung open.

“————————”

Sayama howled. Tears spilled down his face and his hair was disheveled.

He spoke no words or anything else. He simply cried like a small child or like a beast howling at the moon.

It was as if he did not know what else to do.

“————————”

His cry echoed on and on through the empty night sky where even the wind had vanished.

It seemed to be pleading a single word: why?

"I care for you."

Afterword

And that was Owari no Chronicle 6-B.

A lot is in motion now and it all ends with Volume 7 coming up next.

There's still one volume to go, but I only made it this far thanks to all of you. Thank you very much.

Now for the customary chat.

"This is such a pain, so you can just continue from last time."

"You mean like how I helped an old lady cross the street, it turned out she was the president of a major corporation, and now I'm watching the Tyson vs. Akebono fight in Las Vegas?"

"Do you want me to despise you?"

"Go right ahead. I've been starving for some excitement in this boring life of mine."

"Did you head out of the house naked, buy a 1.5 liter drink from a vending machine, and calmly head back home like you talked about earlier?"

"Well, it's been so hot lately."

"Wow, you really are awful. So what's your next mission?"

"Dancing naked in front of a neighborhood house. They'll never imagine someone's dancing naked in front of their happy little home. If I can hear a night game broadcast while I do it, that would be perfect."

"That's a crime, you know? In more ways than one. What if a kid opens the door with a fireworks set in hand?"

"They'll probably think it's a summer dream. Don't worry, I've been working out."

"That first part doesn't have anything to do with the last part. And what is it with you and nudity?"

"Well, I get bored."

"That makes no sense!!"

"Besides, wearing clothes at home is such a pain. I do wear them in winter, though."

"So it's like an animal's summer coat and winter coat?"

Oh, we didn't talk about our middle and high school days. Oh, well.

Anyway, I'll leave it at that. My background music this time was Fairchild's Chiisana Hoshi. (When it snows, no other song will do.)

"Who cried the loudest?"

Anyway, the next one will be out in a month, so wait just a bit.

September 2005. A morning after a typhoon.

-Kawakami Minoru

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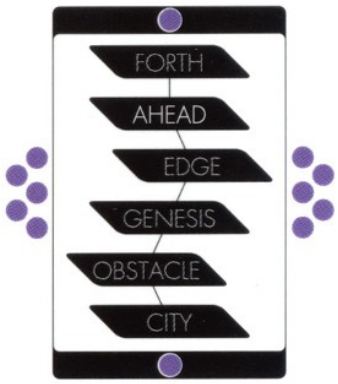

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